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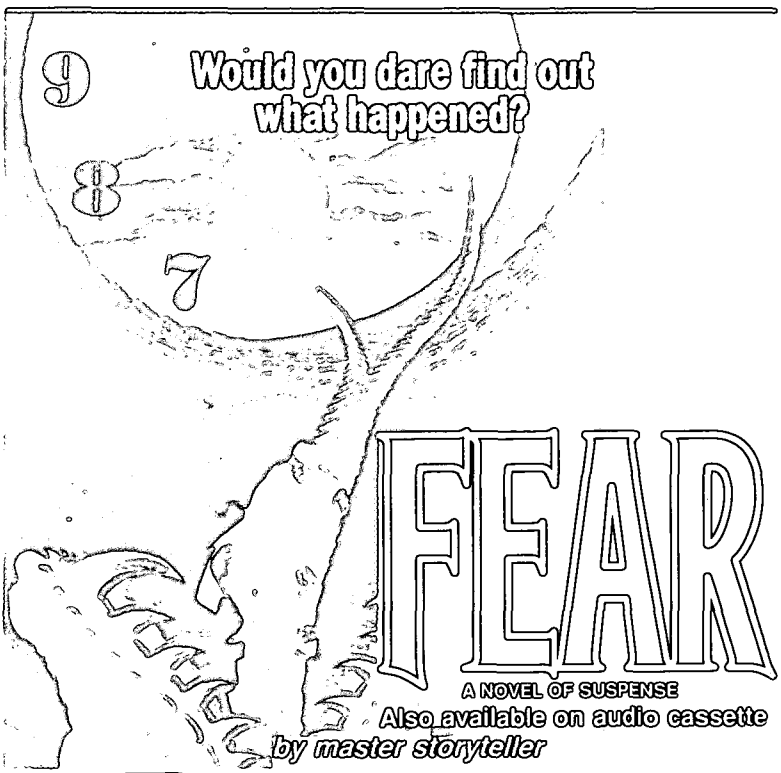

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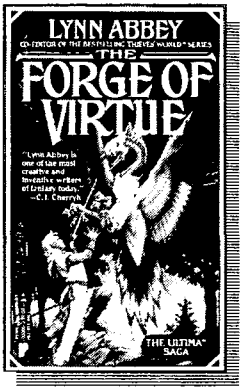
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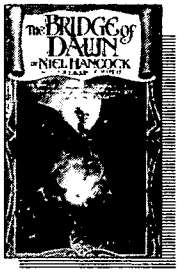

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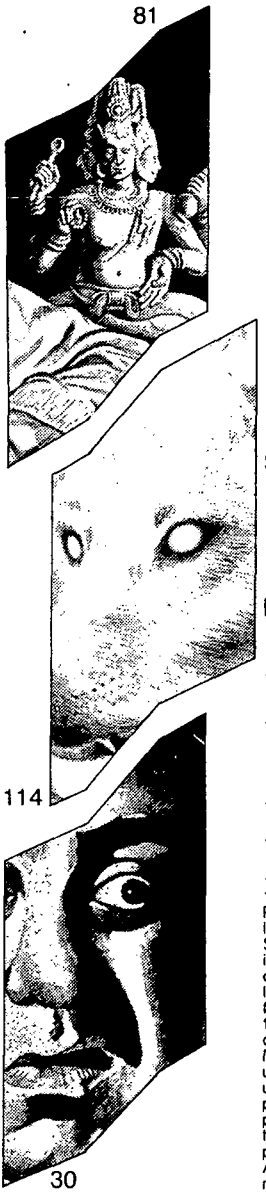

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EDITORIAL

GORBACHEV

by Isaac Asimov

Introduction to "Gorbachev"

My invitation to the Gorbachev luncheon was entirely because of my status as a science fiction writer. This was such an honor for myself, for this science fiction magazine, and for science fiction in general, that I felt bound to write up the incident as a special report for *IAsfm*. How different from the days when kids at school used to be disciplined for reading science fiction on the ground that it was "trash."

On Friday, May 25, 1990, I received a call from the Soviet Embassy in Washington. Would I come to Washington and have lunch with President Gorbachev at the Soviet Embassy on Thursday, May 31, at one P.M.? He would be in Washington in connection with a summit meeting with Bush, and he wanted a lunch with various cultural luminaries. (They asked me for the phone number of Ray Bradbury, too, but I didn't have it.)

I was in an instant quandary. I had missed meeting Gorbachev when he had last been in New York, for though I had had an invitation to a reception, he had left a day early because of the disastrous Armenian earthquake and the reception was canceled. That was a great disappointment to me, and now that I had a second chance, I didn't want to miss it. On the other hand, I hate traveling and I already had two trips to Washington scheduled for later in the year, so I hesitated to make a third one.

I said I would have to consult my wife and the Embassy attaché quickly said that I was the only one invited, not Janet (no room). That made things a bit darker and I asked him to call back in the afternoon. I consulted Janet, who promptly said I had to go, and just as promptly said she would come with me and if she couldn't take part in the lunch, then at least she would wait for me and have me tell her all about it. To prove she was serious, she made a reservation for the eight A.M. train to Washington for the 31st, and she got a parlor car reservation, too, so that we could eat breakfast in comfort on board.

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On Tuesday, the 30th, I picked up the tickets, plus another pair for a four P.M. return on the same day since I did not want to spend the night in Washington. Parlor car again, so that Janet could have dinner in comfort.

The 31st dawned bright and sunny and with every prospect for perfect weather, which was actually what we had. A cloudless sky, with a temperature reaching perhaps 80 at the warmest and no humidity to speak of. It was only 57 or so when we left but we dressed for an early summer day and we were right.

We did carry some items that we thought we might conceivably need in case of accident or discomfort (we didn't) and I took along such pills as I must take these days. Our main load was a couple of books we brought for Gorbachev. I took my *Asimov's Chronology of Science and Discovery*, a big, heavy history of science, mainly to show Gorbachev that I was not *only* a science fiction writer. Janet took one of her later Norby books, *Norby and Yobo's Great Adventure*.

The trip to Washington was uneventful (exactly as we wanted it to be) and we were indeed served breakfast on the train, though I satisfied myself with bread and jam. We arrived in Union Station at Washington at eleven A.M. and a taxi took us to the Soviet Embassy, where my invitation card got us through the police lines. We were some two hours early and we could not be allowed in. I explained

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that I realized that; I had only come to ask if, while I was having lunch, my wife might be allowed to wait for me elsewhere in the Embassy. The person I spoke to wasn't certain. He was clearly not the one to make decisions and I suppose that the necessity for tight security hobbled him. He left us to consult someone else, then returned and said he *thought* it could be done. He clearly did not wish to commit himself.

I then asked if there were a hotel in the immediate vicinity and there was one, indeed. It was the Jefferson Hotel just catty-corner across the intersection from the Embassy. It turned out to be ideal. It was under new Japanese ownership and it was in perfect shape. Nor was it in any way crowded, for the street was blocked for security and that meant that few people could reach the hotel. We were almost alone in it and were treated with the utmost courtesy.

We walked into the dining room, and in solitary splendor, Janet had a lobster salad and a delightful gelatinized fruit dessert, while I satisfied myself with a cup of coffee. Janet ate in very leisurely fashion for we had lots of time.

Finally, at about 12:30 P.M., we were back at the Embassy and had to wait outside the police lines while the rooms were made ready for us. One of the people who guarded the lines, and who turned out to be a Secret Service man (rather small and slight, with a mustache, and with what looked like a hearing aid in his ear, but was undoubtedly a device for the transmission of orders to him if that proved necessary), recognized me, which was pleasant.

I felt a little uneasy about having to wait outside the lines, wondering if through some mixup I might not be allowed in, but John Kenneth Galbraith showed up, all 6'8" of him, and he wasn't allowed past either. That cheered me up.

At 12:45 P.M., we were allowed to walk in. I simply took Janet along with me and once I was actually in the building I said that I had been told she could wait for me and could they put her in a comfortable spot? A very attractive Soviet woman was kindness itself and took her to a room where she could sit and be comfortable. Noticing that I looked anxious when she disappeared from sight, she offered to show me where Janet would be sitting and promised she would take me there when the luncheon was over. So I kissed Janet and then went through the archway designed to detect metal, and up a broad winding stairway past a huge portrait of Lenin.

Also present among the guests were Jane Fonda, Gregory Peck, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Galbraith, Van Cliburn, Andrew Wyeth, Ray Bradbury, whose telephone number they had obviously obtained, Jesse Jackson, and others whom I did not recognize.

Jesse was the only black present and there were perhaps three women present. It was almost en-

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tirely a white, male assemblage.

I made no effort to force myself on anyone since it is my firm practice never to attempt to meet celebrities. Let *them* attempt to meet *me*.

Some did. Some came up to greet me and to tell me that they had met me on such and such an occasion or heard me give such and such a talk. They would then introduce someone else, who would announce his name, and I would say, "I'm Isaac Asimov" and they would invariably say, "Yes, I know."—That was pleasant.

I did stop to talk to Ray Bradbury, who's an old friend of mine even though we haven't seen each other more than four or five times in the actual flesh.

He said to me, "Are there any other science fiction writers present?"

"No," I said, "but I think that we two Grand Masters can carry the load."

And he agreed.

There were a number of Soviet officials present, of course, and a number of them recognized me without trouble. One said he recognized me by my trademark. I stroked my white sideburns and said, "You mean these, of course."

"No," he said, "I mean that." And he pointed to my bolo tie.

There was a placard which showed all the tables with the names of the various people placed around them. I was at Table 7, which along with Table 8 was the farthest removed from the podium. Jane Fonda was at the table nearest the podium, which made sense to me. If I were Gorbachev, I'd rather look at her close up than at me. But then someone came to me and suggested politely that I get in line for it was exactly one P.M. and Gorbachev and Raisa were ready to greet their guests. I had not seen them come in.

Gorbachev looked exactly as he did on television except that the mulberry mark on his head wasn't as pronounced in real life as on TV. He was about my height, had dark, bright eyes, a ready smile and seemed totally at ease, and completely friendly.

I was holding the two books. I had questioned a Soviet functionary and he'd said I couldn't give them to Gorbachev directly but that I could give them to him after lunch and he would see that Gorbachev got them. When I came up to Gorbachev, he held out his hand to me and greeted me (with a translator directly behind him converting his remarks into English).

I said, "I am Isaac Asimov. I am a writer."

"Yes," he said, "I know. My daughter is a great fan of yours and is very fond of your books. She reads them all the time."

I could not help but say, "Has she time for anything else?" though I suspect that Gorbachev does not know I have published 454 books, and probably didn't get the humor of the remark. I then, on impulse, handed him my books and he took them, glanced at them with what

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seemed to be interest and passed them on to someone behind him.

I then shook hands with Raisa, too, and walked into the dining room, which was an elaborate place that could seat seventy or eighty and was very tastefully decorated.

It took a while for Gorbachev to finish with the reception line but then he came in and everyone sat down.

Gorbachev then began to speak and those of us who could not understand Russian put on earphones so that we could get an instantaneous translation into English. The translator seemed very nervous and I don't blame him. He had to listen to Gorbachev, translate on the spot, and not lose any of Gorbachev's further words while he was translating. And to make a mistake in translation would, of course, have been serious.

The speech was rather rambling though he said all the right things about world peace. He mentioned Lithuania's action as being one that had been carried through too speedily and without proper thought. The result is, he said "that Lithuania is at a loss for what to do next and so is the Soviet Union." This was a very frank admission that impressed me enormously.

He mentioned a very few people in the audience by name but at the end, he said, "We have two science fiction writers here, Asimov and Bradbury, and they are my daughter's favorite reading." That was a very nice plug and the Soviet people at my table smiled and congratulated me for having been mentioned.

Van Cliburn and Andrew Wyeth were at my table but I didn't talk to them. For the most part I talked to the Soviet official at my left who had once, it turned out, been part of a television team that had interviewed me on world peace in Central Park. We had walked along while he asked questions and I answered.

He said to me, "How is your wife?"

I said, "She is waiting for me downstairs." Then, I added apologetically, "We hate to be separated."

He said, "Still?"

And when I looked surprised, he reminded me of the television interview. When I was done, I had waved at Janet who had been waiting for me near the entrance to the park and we'd run toward each other jubilantly. Overcome by the notion of running toward each other in the park, I imitated the movie sequences in which such running is shown in slow motion, and Janet picked it up. When we came together, we were hugging and laughing, and it was only then that we realized that the Soviet cameraman had run after us to get it all down on film.

My friend at the left said, "That was a very popular sequence in the Soviet Union. The people liked it."

I thought: What a stroke for world understanding. The Soviets can see that American married couples love each other, also.

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My friend was annoyed that Janet should be waiting downstairs. There was an empty seat at our table—a no-show, no doubt—and she could have eaten there. Afterward, though, Janet said that would have been inappropriate since no one else had brought a wife (or husband). Van Cliburn had brought his aged mother, however.

I also spoke to Mr. Gerasimov, who sat at the next table. I said I recognized him from his frequent appearances on television as the Soviet government spokesman, but he said that I ought to recognize him from my apartment since he had once interviewed me there. Score one for him.

I said to him, "Please tell me that things will go well in the Soviet Union, for the news reports here in America are frightening."

He shrugged and said, "Very few Soviet people understand what is meant by democracy. They don't understand that in order to enjoy democracy you also have to practice responsibility."

I said, "There are people in the United States who also don't understand this."

The meal was notable for two characteristics. There was plenty to eat and the service was at a fast run. We didn't start eating till 1:30 P.M. and I had been told the dinner would be over at 2:30 P.M., for Gorbachev had afternoon appointments, of course.

That meant that a veritable army of waiters descended upon us with food and as soon as we finished one dish it was whisked away and another was placed before us.

We began with assorted appetizers: caviar, salmon roe, olives, two or three slices of different fish (including that most heavenly of all fishes, sturgeon). I should not have eaten any of it, but I felt that never again would I eat it—so I did—and I knew I would require extra diuretics for a long time.

Following that were three (count them, three) full-size entrees —sliced turkey, broiled salmon, and chicken kiev, each with its complement of vegetables.

There were two kinds of bread on the table, light and dark, and as soon as any slices were consumed, more slices were put in front of the guest. There were three glasses at each place setting. One contained red wine, and one contained white wine, and they were constantly being refilled, too. Not mine, however, for I didn't touch them. Even when we drank toasts, I merely went through the motions. The third glass contained water, which was a relief, for I had to take a pill. I placed the pill in my mouth and washed it down with the water, which turned out to be champagne. I hope no one noticed the surprised face I made.

By the time the desserts came (there were three desserts, the first of which was strawberry ice cream) I looked at my watch and it was already 2:45. The luncheon was not over and, in fact, a question-and-answer session was starting.

I had my four P.M. train to catch;

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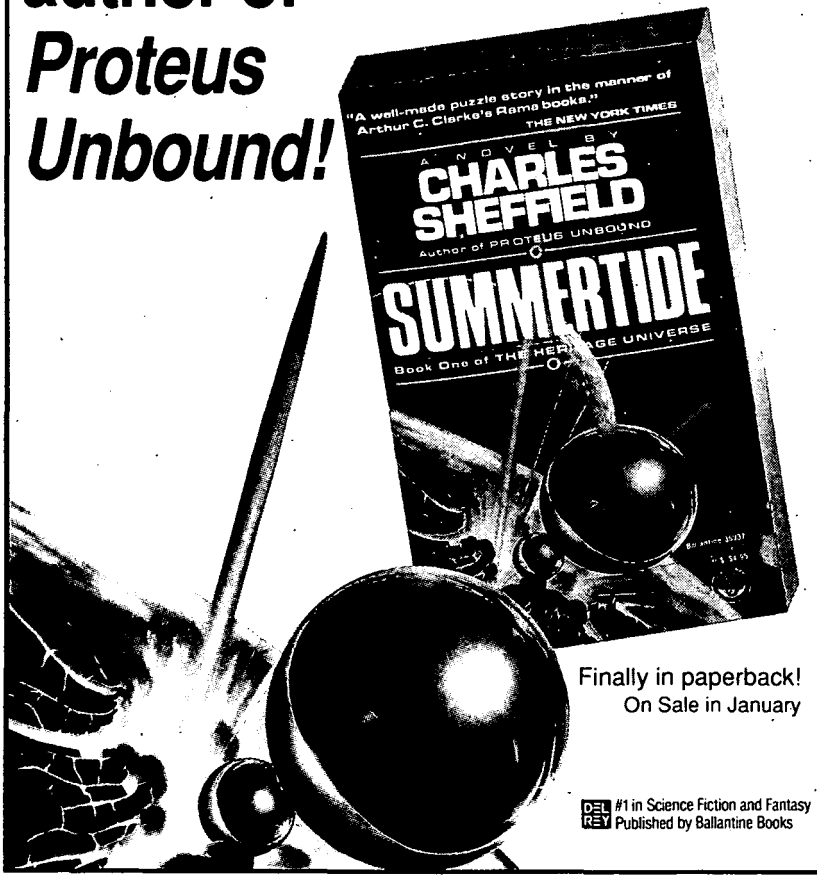
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I was terribly homesick for Janet; and I felt I had had enough. I didn't wait for the last two desserts, or for the coffee. I made my excuses, and departed. I picked up Janet who had been waiting in perfect comfort and we left.

We were the first ones out, of course, since I was the only one who felt it necessary to leave before the bitter end, and we walked in the direction of the street, where, we were told, we had the best chance of picking up a taxi. We felt a bit funny about this because everyone else, as near as I could make out, had arrived by limousine. We were the only taxi people. To the secret service man who recognized me, I pointed this out when I asked him about where one could get a taxi, and explained: "I was born poor and never got over it."

All was well until we passed the police line and then a horde of reporters jumped all over me—not because I was me, but because I was the first one out. They wanted to know what I thought of Gorbachev, how he behaved, and what he had to say. I did my best and told them exactly what I have stated in this essay.

Then they wanted to know how he had come to pick the various people who had attended the luncheon. I responded with what seemed obvious to me. I said, "I suppose he wanted to meet with representatives of American culture who were well-known in the Soviet Union. For instance, Ray Bradbury and I are science fiction writers whose books are enormously popular in the Soviet Union."

Then they asked me for what reason Gorbachev felt he had to have this luncheon. Well, how on Earth could I possibly know? So I gave what I thought was a reasonable answer. I said, "I think that Mr. Gorbachev may have felt that a politician should not talk only to other politicans."

But then an empty taxi came along and we were rescued. I wondered if any of this would appear in the newspapers or on television; if I would be quoted. However, as far as I know the feeding-frenzy came to nothing. In the next morning's New York *Times*, the luncheon made the front page, but you didn't find out that I was a guest until you went on to the continuation of the story on an inside page. There was also a small listing of some of the guests in a box on that inside page. They were listed in alphabetical order and I was second. What I didn't see, but what Janet did and pointed out to me was a transcript of Gorbachev's luncheon speech complete with the reference to Bradbury and to me at the end. That was very nice.

We made the 4 P.M. return train in plenty of time and had a very pleasant and uneventful trip back to New York. Janet had dinner on the train and I had an apple.

We were home at 7:15 P.M. and I had been away from home for exactly twelve hours. It was a good twelve hours and I was very glad I had decided to go. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov;

Thank you for the story on the computer that thinks for itself. I went to sleep that night and dreamed my computer had eyes watching me! One point, however, computers don't get oiled. Their microchips don't like that sticky black stuff.

I have read your work since I was a girl in high school. I can remember reading my way through the stacks of science fiction books at the library, the only girl in the section. How refreshing it was for me as an adult woman to find other women not ony enjoying science fiction, but writing it. Part of the reason science fiction now appeals to more of the female gender is that you have brought it out of the "gear" head stage. Many of those early books I picked up and put down were so technical, they held no human interest for me. I thank you for all you have written, have taught and encouraged in other science fiction writers so that today we have an exciting body of literature to choose from. And some colleges are even offering courses in the science fiction novel. What a nice way to earn three credits!

Thanks again. You're the greatest.

Sincerely,

Beatrice Sheftel
Manchester, CT

I'm not sure I can take credit for pulling science fiction out of what you call the "gear" head stage. It seems to me there must have been dozens of other writers writing stories that didn't involve themselves exclusively with technology. As for courses in science fiction, my daughter, when in high school, came home all excited when she found out that The Foundation Trilogy *was assigned reading in her class.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the letters section of the March 1990 issue, J.L. Puckett asked whether you remembered a SF book about the earth being devastated by a virus. The offspring of the few survivors went through a retrograde evolution.

Mr. Puckett's description closely matches the plot of *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart. The book is considered a classic by many. The "retrograde evolution" in *Earth Abides* was cultural rather than biological. Perhaps that is why you were unable to remember this well-known novel.

The work was copyright 1949. The Fawcett Crest softcover edition that I have was printed in 1971. I don't know if it is currently in print. If not, he should be able

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to find a copy in the library or at a second hand book dealer.

By the way, the title refers to a quote from Ecclesiastes, which captures the flavor of the book: "Men go and come, but earth abides."

Yours truly,

Michael A. Frasca
Peoria, IL

Please remember that if I read every science fiction story ever printed, I would have no time to write my own. Something has to give, you know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I just got back from a writer's workshop conducted at Southern College of Technology today. It was a real experience; seven other guys and I learned the basics, threw out ideas, had stories critiqued and generally had a good time. The gentlemen conducting the workshop were Brad Linaweaver, author of *Moon of Ice*, and Brad Strickland, author of *Moon Dreams*. Both of these men are clearly the ones to watch, for I'm sure that they will become big names in the SF/fantasy field.

I liked Joe Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax" and am looking forward to the novel later this year. I'd like to point out that with this story Haldeman joins a very exclusive fraternity: one that consists of people who have depicted alternate timelines branching off from events in the 1980s. Some of the others in this group are Kim Stanley Robinson ("Remaking History"), Rand B. Lee ("Knight of Shallows"), and Steve Jackson (the game Raid on Iran, put out by Steve Jackson Games). It may be a while before more writers try 1980s alternate histories, since the decade is just now over.

I finished *The Caves of Steel* a week or so ago and enjoyed it very much. I'd like to see a good movie made of it; my choices for casting would be Gene Hackman as Lije Baley, Ann-Margret as Jessie Baley and Christopher Reeve as Daneel Olivaw. What do you think?

I'd like to see more alternate world stories in *IAsfm*, and I think that the theme can really test the abilities and imagination of any writer. You may need a history book to help with the background, but the imagination can run free with a whole new world and history to work with.

Thomas Cron
Riverdale, GA

There's the dilemma that forever faces editors. You like alternate-world stories, but we have received letters from people who don't like them. What to do? Well, the editor is forced to make his own judgements, that's all. Yes, I think Christopher Reeve would look like Daneel.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov

I have been reading your namesake magazine for years, I purchased the first issue. I have never found your copy editors to overlook really obvious errors, until now. In "Elegy for Angels and Dogs" by Walter Jon Williams (May 1990) I found several. One was obvious and the others needed just a little looking or thought.

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First, the really obvious. Before the hunt began Lamoral picked up a "double-barrelled top break single-shot." Why have two barrels on a single shot? If he really was going to hunt boar, a large and potentially dangerous animal, he would not use an obviously broken gun.

Later on the same page Lamoral placed two .470 Nitro Express slugs into the barrels, couldn't he afford the entire cartridges? Since it is a very inconvenient way to carry extra ammunition, why load both barrels if the gun was only a single shot?

The .470 Nitro Express was not introduced until 1907. Since this is not a story of time travel into the past how did Lamoral get one with a makers date indicating 1892 manufacture? This is also a British cartridge and only rarely found even now in Continental guns.

Finally, the .470 Nitro Express is a very powerful cartridge, for the largest dangerous game, up to elephant or a moderately large dinosaur. It is much too heavy to use on such a relatively small animal as a pig (I guess if they bite back there is no such thing as overkill). While ivory is very beautiful I would question the choice of using it for stock material on such a powerful arm. It would have had to have been pieced together since no tusk would have the girth to make a stock big enough to fit on such a rifle. Further, ivory's strength is not suitable for such a use. Ivory is traditionally used only for pistol stocks or pieced together for comparatively low powered shoulder arms.

David W. Loeffler
Sacramento, CA

Someone once asked Agatha Christie why there were so few lower-class individuals in her stories. Her answer was, "I don't know how lower-class individuals talk." For that very same reason, I almost never put guns in my stories and when I must, I use only one word for it—gun. I'll let you and Mr. Williams fight it out, if you wish, though frankly, I'm always a little uneasy in the presence of people who know too much about guns.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, et al.:

I was thoroughly enjoying Damian Kilby's "Travelers" (February, 1990) until . . . "Here, I find myself in a world of millions of blind people—all banging around, crashing into each other. In theory, I can take anything I want." Is that so?

I am a junior at Princeton University and have been totally blind since birth. I have had to cope with ridiculous notions about my blindness since my very first memories, and it took a long time before I realized where those notions came from. It was inconceivable to me, until further exposure to television and literature, that people could make such bizarre inferences about me simply because I could not see. "Blind people can't read; blind people can't cut their food; blind people are mentally retarded; blind people do not have sex . . ." You get the idea. If the portrayal of blind characters were more diverse, if we were depicted as ordinary human beings more than once in a while, I would not be complaining about this tiny excerpt from this one short story. I am certain that most

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of your readership did not notice it. However, statements of this nature send subliminal messages which do nothing but strengthen and justify the stereotypes and prejudice I must face on a regular basis. Mr. Kilby's error—probably unintentional—is a *direct* cause of such problems. Remember, please, that the word processor is mightier than the AK-47. Or something like that.

Let me assure Mr. Kilby and anyone who makes assumptions about blind people without just cause that as far as I've been able to ascertain, there is no banging and crashing into one another at a gathering of blind people. In addition, we are not likely to be submissive, accepting victims if someone attempts to take something from us, including our dignity.

Blindness is not synonymous with ignorance and oblivion. I do not consider my blindness a handicap, merely an inconvenience. Those who are uncomfortable with blindness and create reasons to rationalize their discomfort which make my life difficult are handicapped. They need pity; I do not.

Sincerely,

Christine Faltz
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ

You must not insist on taking a writer's words absolutely literally. Kilby, I'm sure, was thinking of a famous statement made by the Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, in 1523. That statement went, "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." Kilby didn't want to use the quote directly, so he tried to put it more colorfully—perhaps a little too colorfully—but certainly with no evil intent.

—Isaac Asimov

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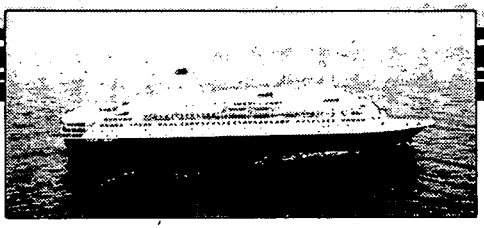

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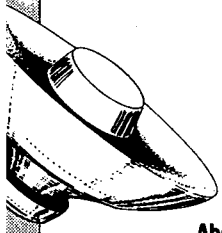

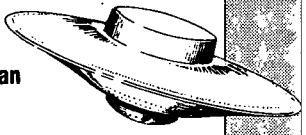

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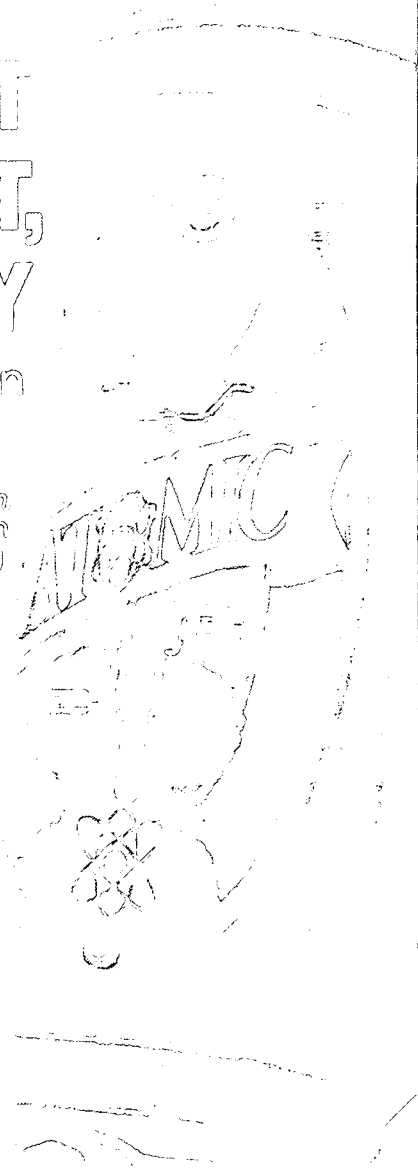
BRIGHT LIGHT, BIG CITY

by Greg Costikyan

In his first story for *Asimov*, new writer Greg Costikyan hits the ground running with a terrifying tale of nuclear terrorism in New York City . . .



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IBM was down a point. Not unusual, but I wondered why. Rumor had it that their profits would be up next quarter. I stared at the Quotron screen and frowned.

Something zipped past on the news line. I caught "terrorists," "New York," and " . . ton device."

What?

I pulled up Hot News. "AT&T Sues IBM," aha, but where . . . ? Dammit. They put newsflashes on the news line instanter. Sometimes it takes a minute or two to key a story in to Hot News. They didn't have it up yet. I bashed the keyboard frantically.

Steve came into the office. I looked up from the monitor. "Have you heard?" he said.

"Heard what?"

"Come on," he said. "Mary's got a radio."

So I left the office and went down to Mary's cubicle. Half a dozen people were clustered around—most of the department. Mary had a newsradio station on. " . . demanding one-hundred million dollars, the freeing of a list of 43 imprisoned terrorists world wide, and a formal apology from the United States government for last month's Djibouti incident," it said. "Mayor Cardinale has appealed for calm." And it cut to a scratchy tape of the mayor saying some damnfool thing.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"A nuke . . . " said Mary. She looked a little wan. "They . . . "

"A bunch of wackos claim they've got a hundred kiloton nuke somewhere in Manhattan," said Dave.

I looked around at them. A joke? No. Mary didn't have the imagination for anything this elaborate. And there was the radio: ". . . twenty-two minutes, we'll give you the world. The top story this afternoon: nuclear terrorism in New York. In other news . . . "

I looked at the group again. Here they were, hanging on the radio's every word. They must be shell-shocked.

I picked up the phone. 1-201-659 . . . damn. Busy signal. I tried again. Again. Again. I got a recording this time. "We're sorry, but all long-distance lines . . . "

It took ten tries before I got through to Debbie. "Have you heard?" I said.

"Mike?" she said. "What's up?"

"Listen to me," I said. "Terrorists claim to have a nuclear bomb somewhere in New York."

"What?"

Debbie and I have an odd relationship. She's usually the one that calls the shots in the family. I don't mind. My ego is invested in other things.

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It was atypical of me to issue orders. Atypical enough, I hoped, that she wouldn't question them.

"Don't talk. Listen. Grab clothes for a couple of days. And baby stuff. If you can find the insurance papers for the house in a minute or less, take them. Get a recent statement for the money market account. Get the cat. Get in the car. Get on the Turnpike. Head south. Do it quickly. Do it now."

"What about you?" she said.

"I'll meet you in Philadelphia."

"What? No, I'll wait for . . . "

"Debbie, ten minutes from now, Wall Street can be radioactive slag. You, me, and the baby can all be dead. It will take me at least forty minutes to get to you. In forty minutes, you can be well out of danger. Get in the car. Do it fast, and you just might beat the traffic that's going to come boiling out of the city any minute."

"Okay," she said rapidly. "Where will we meet?"

"When you get to Philly, find a hotel room. Then call your parents in Chicago and tell them where you are. I'll call them to find out."

"Good," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too. Bye."

When I left the office again, they were still clustered around the radio. All except Steve. Takes a while for some people to react, I guess. Mary saw me head for the elevators. I guess something penetrated, because she said, "My God! Ben!" and she picked up a phone.

It took forever for the elevators to come. I'd have taken the stairs, but I was thirty floors up. Probably faster by elevator, even with the delay.

I was surprised there weren't more people on the street. There were a lot more than you'd expect for the late afternoon, though. A lot of them looked pretty panicky. I wondered what I looked like.

I walked for the subway. I walked fast. I headed for the Fifth Avenue stop on the F train. There was already a solid flow of people through the turnstiles. After the turnstiles, you take a long escalator down. The F line is way down there; I don't know why, exactly. Most stations aren't so deep.

I got to the platform and waited. It was already pretty crowded when I got there. The platform rapidly began to fill up with people. I went to the front to make sure I got on the first train; that may have been a mistake. The escalator kept on dumping more and more people on the platform. We were cheek by jowl, now. Some short bearded guy in a business suit had his elbows in my ribs.

The train came. I tried to squeeze on, but I guess I'm not as aggressive as some folks. The hell with it. I waited for the next one.

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The train had relieved the crowding for a moment, but people kept on coming down that escalator. Suddenly, I realized this was actively dangerous. The people at the top of the escalator had no idea how crowded it was down here. They just got on, and then got dumped on the platform. If this went on, people would soon be forced off the platform and onto the tracks.

I wondered what genius had designed this station. I guess he had never expected so quick and so massive a flux of passengers.

Another train came. This time, I was a little more desperate. I got on.

I thought commuting was bad. If five PM on the subway is sardines, we were anchovies. I was in the middle of the car and couldn't reach anything to hang onto; it didn't matter. The press of bodies was so tight that I doubt I could have fallen under any circumstances.

The train trundled forward. I think it was slower than normal. Overloaded, maybe. Rockefeller Center. Forty-second Street. Thirty-fourth. Finally.

Thirty-fourth was as much of a madhouse. Getting out of the train in the teeth of the people who wanted in was like facing the Jets' line of scrimmage. I lost my briefcase somewhere in there. Hell with it; my credit cards were in my wallet, which I still had.

The PATH train, amazingly, wasn't so bad. I guess when people think of routes out of the city, they automatically think of commuter trains, cars, the airports. The PATH—Port Authority Trans-Hudson line, the old Hudson-Manhattan Tube—was really just a glorified subway. Except that it goes to Newark.

Newark ought to be out of the blast radius. And the Newark PATH station is also the Newark train station, smack on the northeast corridor. There'd be trains from Newark to Philadelphia.

I got on a Journal Square train. I'd have to change there for Newark. The train was jammed, God knows, but I didn't have any trouble getting on the first one that came.

I was lucky, I suppose. Or maybe not; maybe it was because I'd acted fast.

It was inevitable, when you think about it. Maybe as inevitable as the California quake. Everyone seems to think a nuke is a big deal; it isn't. I mean, they could build them in the 1940s, for God's sake. When they still had Packards. And television was just a blip on the horizon. When Roosevelt was President. This is archaic technology.

Building a nuke isn't tough. Hell, I could build one myself, given enough plutonium. That's the rub, of course; you can't just pick up the stuff at the corner store. But there are enough nuclear plants in some

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of the world's wackier countries . . . Sooner or later, some unpleasant group of crazies was bound to get one.

And where were they going to plant it? Tel Aviv, maybe, but Mossad is pretty sharp. (In contrast, I suspect, to the CIA.) And who wants to nuke London? Munich? Tokyo? A pretty inoffensive bunch of countries, really.

Nope, if you're a terrorist with a bomb, you've really only got two choices: New York and Washington.

If I'd thought it through, I'd have plugged for Washington. A city of slums, monuments, and bureaucrats. Nuking D.C. would probably be a net plus for the country. Bad for the tourist industry, maybe, but you can't have everything.

In Washington, you get the government; but in New York, you get the financial capital of the world, the nation's biggest city, the U.N., seven and a half million people, including lots and lots of Jews. A consideration, for some terrorist groups.

The train scritched around a curve. There was a Christmas tree in the tunnel. Some PATH employee put it up every year. It was strange, watching the little red and green lights appear and disappear in the darkness of the tunnel.

The PATH runs on electrified track. I wondered what the electromagnetic pulse would do to it. There wasn't a lot of point in worrying.

The bomb wouldn't take out that much of the city, really. The radio had said it was a hundred kiloton device. It would do a number on a chunk of Manhattan, but most of the rest of the city would just suffer fallout.

Of course, the blast would blow out a lot of windows. And there are a *lot* of windows in town. I envisioned midtown under six feet of broken glass. And there aren't any quake-resistant buildings in the city; no active faults around, you see. The blast would produce an earth tremor, of course. That would have interesting effects on the skyline.

I wondered if my house would survive. It's on the Hudson River floodplain on the Jersey side. Unreinforced brick masonry structure, Victorian in age. A major quake, hell, a minor quake would probably reduce it to rubble. And if the bomb actually went off in the Harbor, tsunamis would probably turn half of Hudson County back into the swamp it used to be.

Burn victims. Radiation sickness. Blindness. The hospitals would be swamped. A lot more people would survive than in a nuclear war, of course; the rest of the country would mobilize its medical resources. But still; a pretty grim prospect.

I hoped the government was stalling those bastards, whoever they were. Every minute meant more people out of range.

The train broke out of the tunnel and into daylight. The tracks run

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above ground after they pass through the Palisades. Next stop was Journal Square.

The Newark PATH runs from the World Trade Center, in downtown Manhattan, through Journal Square, to Newark. I had a hell of a time switching to the Newark train. When it pulled into Journal Square, it was already packed to the gills.

I figured the next trains wouldn't be any better. So I squeezed between two cars and stood on the metal platform there. You're not supposed to do that. It's dangerous. There were already two people between the cars where I was.

But I got to Newark.

I got in line to buy a ticket for the train to Philadelphia. I'd have gone straight to the track, but they didn't have any trains posted for some reason.

It was a mob scene at the ticket window. It took me a good fifteen minutes before I could get to the front. "One way to Philly," I screamed through the glass. I had to scream; the station was jammed and noisy.

"No trains south," the attendant yelled back.

What? "Why not?"

"All available rolling stock is evacuating people from New York," he yelled. "We aren't picking up passengers anywhere else on the line."

Damn. *Damn!* Now what? What was I going to do now?

I wandered away from the window in a daze. I'd been operating on momentum up to here. I'd had a plan; get to Newark, get on the train. And now, there was nothing, nothing . . .

I pushed my way to the phones. They weren't as crowded as one might expect. I soon found out why.

I tried to call Debbie's parents collect: I couldn't get an operator. I tried calling the local MCI access number and using my credit card—nothing but a busy signal. I tried calling direct, over AT&T long-lines, in the hope that I could plead some operator out of requiring me to stick in thirty-two dollars in small change—no dice. The call just died.

Figures. The Eastern Seaboard must have been swamped with calls from desperate people.

My God, the terminal looked like something out of World War II: families with piles of possessions, bags and bags stacked on top of one another, one step ahead of the Nazi advance. Woebegone faces. And the Nazis are closing in, *ma chepie,* they say that Sedan has fallen . . .

Stuck in Newark. Stuck. Stuck. What was I going to do?

I could get on the Newark subway. But it doesn't go that far. And it heads mostly north—I didn't want north. I wanted south and west.

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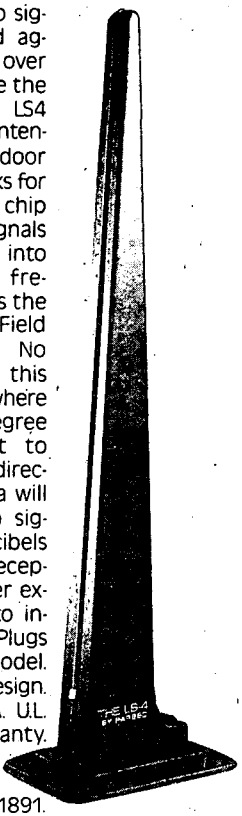

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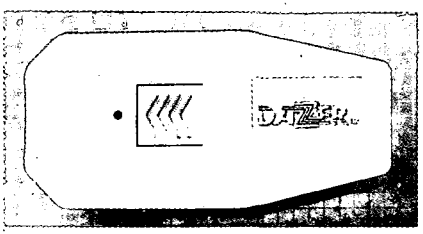

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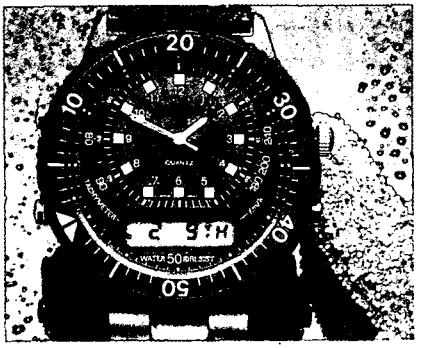

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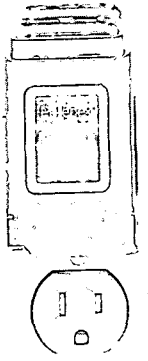

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A car! I could steal a car, and . . .

I could? The hell I could. Who did I think I was, MacGyver or something? I know about as much about automobiles as I do about Pluto. You turn the key, it goes. Hotwiring was beyond my capacities.

Besides which, all routes south were probably bumper-to-bumper by now.

Some ill-shaven guy stopped me. "No trains, huh?" he shouted. I shook my head. "Guess that's okay," he said. "It's just a Hiroshima bomb. Newark should be all right." He turned away.

I thought I'd been so smart getting on the PATH. I should have gone to Penn Station, dammit. I could have gotten on a train there. He said they were picking up passengers in New York . . .

Maybe. I bet the place was mobbed.

That jerk thought we were okay here. Sure, pal. I thought. He might be right. But Newark isn't *that* far away. There was fallout to worry about, if nothing else. I wanted out of here . . .

Wait a minute.

I plunged after the guy, jostling past a black family. "Hey!" I shouted. "Hey buddy!"

He turned. "Whaddaya want," he said, a little suspiciously.

"Want to sell me your clothes?" He was dressed in dungarees and a heavy shirt.

"What?" he said.

"I'll swap clothes with you," I shouted over the crowd. We weren't that far apart in size. "And I'll throw in fifty bucks."

"Deal," he said, and began stripping right there. Several bystanders gave us a dirty look.

Well, what the hell.

It was a good deal. For him. I was wearing a Brooks Brothers suit.

Ever wander the streets of downtown Newark after dark in a Brooks Brothers suit? Neither have I. I don't advise it.

It was cold out. Must have been low forties. Getting on toward dusk. Night comes around five o'clock in late November. I walked briskly down Market, westward and away from the station. Market was pretty busy. It's what passes for a shopping street in Newark.

What was I going to do? Walk to Philadelphia?

If that's what it took. Every step I took was a step farther away from New York. Every hour was three miles distance—four, if I pushed it. Three miles could make all the difference in the world . . .

I heard the tinkle of broken glass. A little later, a Puerto Rican guy ran past me with a VCR and a big grin. To be expected, I suppose; the authorities had bigger problems to worry about than a little looting.

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And there, on Market Street, heading west, I saw this store. Downtown Cycles. I stopped in front of it. I stood there for a full minute, peering in.

There were lots of other people on the street—but none of them looked like a cop.

The store was closed. The last vestiges of sunlight were dissipating. And I debated morality. For fifteen seconds, or so, anyway. Then, I found a brick and heaved it through the plate glass.

Sorry bastard didn't even have a metal grate on his store. Wrong neighborhood to be trusting.

Did I want a mountain cycle? A touring cycle? What the hell did I know about bikes? I grabbed one, yanked it through the broken glass, perched on it, and pedaled madly away.

There must have been twenty witnesses. But who cares? I bet the store was cleaned out within the hour.

I had no real idea where I was going, but I knew that the setting sun was roughly south and west. I'm no astronomer, but I can find the Big Dipper—and it was getting on toward winter. Orion would be in the sky. I could recognize Orion. From either the Dipper or Orion, I could find the North star.

I pedaled fast, trying to keep warm. Also trying to avoid trouble. This was not exactly Forest Hills. Nobody in his right mind would nuke Newark. If someone did, he'd probably get a medal. Or an urban renewal grant.

Burnt-out buildings. Empty lots. Surly looking black guys standing around on the stoops of decrepit brownstones. What was left of the housing stock looked good. Anywhere else, the neighborhood would have been a gentrifier's heaven. But not in Newark.

They stared at me as I cycled madly past, but nobody stopped me. I was glad I wasn't wearing a suit.

Did I want to get on a highway? Sure, why not? It would probably be bumper-to-bumper, but a bicycle ought to get through.

Then, I thought: maybe not. I envisioned some desperate bastard with a handgun in his glove compartment, spotting me on the cycle and murdering me for it. It didn't seem worth the risk.

Back roads, that was the ticket. There probably wouldn't be much traffic.

Of course, my knowledge of New Jersey's road net was limited to the Turnpike and the Garden State. I'd probably get hopelessly lost. But as long as I kept on south and west, I should be all right.

The street split. The southern branch was named South Orange Avenue. In Jersey, they often name streets after nearby towns. South Orange is west of Newark. It looked promising, so I took it.

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* * *

Damn, it was cold.

In South Orange, I passed a bar. I went in, partly to get warm, but mostly to use the pay phone. I had to get through to Debbie's parents. When she got to Philly, she'd be desperate about me. They needed to know . . .

No luck.

I called again from a gas station in Short Hills . . .

I called in Summit, in Murray Hill, in Watchung . . .

EHNNT, EHNNT, EHNNT . . . I got awfully tired of that busy signal.

Four hours later I was in some damn place called Skillman, New Jersey. I was half frozen to death, exhausted, lost, and my ass hurt like hell. I don't think I'd been on a bike in fifteen years. And I was badly out of shape.

The road seemed to be going in more or less the right direction. I kept on hoping I'd pass someplace where I could steal a coat. But this was a country road. No shopping along here.

Aha! An Exxon station. It was after ten now. The station was closed. And there wasn't much traffic on the road . . .

I broke in, punching my way through the glass on the door.

They had maps! I stole one. Candy bars. Soda. Cigarettes . . . I even found a mechanic's jacket. It said "Randy" on the lapel. I guess I could be a Randy. It was tight, but I shrugged into it.

No point in hanging around the scene of a burglary. I took off down the road.

A quarter mile later, I wheeled the bike into the side of the woods and stood, sheltered from the highway. I was on a little rise, an overgrown meadow before me, probably grazing land at one time. I dined on my repast of Snickers and warm Coke, then lit a cigarette. I hadn't smoked in years, but cancer seemed pretty remote just then.

Funny how we were always afraid of the Russians. In retrospect, there probably never was much threat of a full-scale nuclear exchange. At least, not after Stalin died. You'd have to be nuts to fight a nuclear war.

But nuclear terrorism . . . *that* makes sense. With seven-and-a-half million lives at stake, I'd bet the President would fold pretty quick. A hard line against terrorism is one thing, but this . . .

The wind was cold. I lit another cigarette off my old one. I cupped my hand around the tip; a cigarette doesn't put out enough heat to keep a deer tick warm, but somehow the little glowing coal is comforting.

There was a big motherfucking peal of thunder. I started.

There was a glow on the horizon to the north. North and east. It hung there for ten seconds—twenty—thirty—I must have missed the flash; it

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would have been below the horizon. I was looking at the mushroom cloud, miles above the city. A firestorm, the very air burning.

Dead people. Dying people. Probably made Auschwitz look like summer camp.

Should have nuked Washington. The fuckers.

The phones didn't even work after that. The EMP must have blown the crap out of something.

Dawn found me wearily cycling over the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. Commuter traffic was already beginning. Normal, everyday people driving to their normal, everyday Philadelphia jobs. As if nothing had happened. Terrorists blew up New York, Martha, pass the sugar. Oh, look, Oprah Winfrey's got a new boyfriend.

I found a pay phone. Son of a bitch, the damn thing worked. Thank God for Pennsylvania Bell.

6:30 AM here, 5:30 in Chicago. I expected my in-laws to take a while to drag themselves out of bed. But this is how it was: Rrr . . . Snatch. "Hello?"

"Hi, Barb . . . ?"

"Mike! My God! Are you all right?"

The phone didn't even get a chance to make a full ring. They'd been up all night, worrying.

Debbie was at the Mark Plaza. I called her. After the usual emotional exchange, she told me that everything had gone okay. The traffic had been bad, but she'd beaten the worst of it. The baby was okay, the insurance papers were gone . . . but what the hell.

"Mike?" she said.

"Yeah, sugar?"

"I couldn't find Trevor."

I chuckled. "Hell, Debbie," I said. "I'm sorry about the cat, but you're alive. I'm alive. The baby's alive. And I'll see you in just a few minutes."

And for a while, I felt relieved. I was exhausted and cold and I might never be able to sit down again, but that was all over. The house might be gone, and my job, and our savings . . . but we'd survived.

Trevor. I pictured him, the house smashed down around his ears, his bedraggled corpse atop the splintered remains of the bookcase he liked to sit on, red brick dust across his fur—wet from the Harbor tsunami, charred from the firestorm. Voices screaming, burn victims in agony, people buried alive in the wreckage . . .

But mostly, I pictured Trevor, dead in a fashion he could not begin to fathom, his protectors vanished forever . . .

And damned if *that* wasn't when I began to cry. ●

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THE BETTER BOY

by James P. Blaylock and Tim Powers

We welcome James P. Blaylock back to our pages after far too long an absence. Since his last story for *IAsfm*, "Myron Chester and the Toads" (February 1987), Mr. Blaylock has written a novel, *The Lost Coin* (Ace), that was a finalist for the 1989 World Fantasy Award, and a short story, "Unidentified Flying Objects," that appeared in *Prize Stories 1990: The O. Henry Awards*. Mr. Blaylock's latest novel, *The Paper Grail*, is forthcoming from Ace Books.

For Tim Powers, "The Better Boy" marks his first appearance in *IAsfm*. Mr. Powers is the author of seven novels including *The Anubis Gates*, which won both the Phillip K. Dick Memorial Award and the Prix Apollo. His most recently published novel *The Stress of Her Regard*—a sweeping tale of love and literature and politics and vampires in Europe in the 1820s—has just been nominated for the World Fantasy Award.

art: Laura Lakey

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Knock knock.

Bernard Wilkins twisted the scratched restaurant butter-knife in his pudgy hand to catch the eastern sun.

There was a subtle magic in the morning. He felt it most at breakfast—the smells of bacon and coffee, the sound of birds outside, the arrangement of clouds in the deep summer sky, and the day laid out before him like a roadmap unfolded on a dashboard.

This morning he could surely allow himself to forget about the worms and the ether bunnies.

It was Saturday, and he was going to take it easy today, go home and do the crossword puzzle, maybe get the ball game on the radio late in the afternoon while he put in a couple of hours in the garage. The Angels were a half game out and were playing Oakland at two o'clock. In last night's game Downing had slammed a home run into the outfield scoreboard, knocking out the scoreboard's electrical system, and the crowd had gone flat-out crazy, cheering for six solid minutes, stomping and clapping and hooting until the stands were vibrating so badly that they had to stop the game to let everybody calm down.

In his living room Wilkins had been stomping right along with the rest of them, till he was nearly worn out with it.

He grinned now to think about it. Baseball—there was magic in baseball, too . . . even in your living room you could imagine it, beer and hot dogs, those frozen malts, the smell of cut grass, the summer evenings.

He could remember the smell of baseball leather from his childhood, grass-stained hardballs and new gloves. Chiefly it was the dill pickles and black licorice and Cokes in paper cups that he remembered from back then, when he had played little league ball. They had sold the stuff out of a plywood shack behind the major league diamond.

It was just after eight o'clock in the morning, and Norm's coffee shop was getting crowded with people knocking back coffee and orange juice.

There was nothing like a good meal. Time stopped while you were eating. Troubles abdicated. It was like a holiday. Wilkins sopped up the last of the egg yolk with a scrap of toast, salted it, and put it into his mouth, chewing contentedly. Annie, the waitress, laid his check on the counter, winked at him, and then went off to deal with a wild-eyed woman who wore a half dozen tattered sweaters all at once and was carefully emptying the ketchup bottle onto soda crackers she'd pick out of a basket, afterward dropping them one by one into her icewater, mixing up a sort of poverty-style gazpacho.

Wilkins sighed, wiped his mouth, left a 20 percent tip, heaved himself off the stool and headed for the cash register near the door.

"A good meal," he said to himself comfortably, as if it were an occult

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phrase. He paid up, then rolled a toothpick out of the dispenser and poked it between his teeth. He pushed open the glass door with a lordly sweep, and strode outside onto the sidewalk.

The morning was fine and warm. He walked to the parking lot edge of the pavement, letting the sun wash over him as he hitched up his pants and tucked his thumbs through his belt loops. What he needed was a pair of suspenders. Belts weren't worth much to a fat man. He rolled the toothpick back and forth in his mouth, working it expertly with his tongue.

He was wearing his inventor's pants. That's what he had come to call them. He'd had them how many years? Fifteen, anyway. Last winter he had tried to order another pair through a catalogue company back in Wisconsin, but hadn't had any luck. They were khaki work pants with eight separate pockets and oversized, reinforced belt loops. He wore a heavy key chain on one of the loops, with a retractable ring holding a dozen assorted keys—all the more reason for the suspenders.

The cotton fabric of the trousers was web-thin in places. His wife had patched the knees six different times and had resewn the inseam twice. She wasn't happy about the idea of him wearing the pants out in public. Some day, Molly was certain of it, he would sit down on the counter stool at Norm's and the entire rear end would rip right out of them.

Well, that was something Wilkins would face when the time came. He was certain, in his heart, that there would always be a way to patch the pants one more time, which meant infinitely. A stitch in time. Everything was patchable.

"Son of a bitch!" came a shout behind him. He jumped and turned around.

It was the raggedy woman who had been mixing ketchup and crackers into her ice water. She had apparently abandoned her makeshift breakfast.

"What if I *am* a whore?" she demanded of some long-gone debating partner. "Did he ever give *me* a dollar?"

Moved somehow by the sunny morning, Wilkins impulsively tugged a dollar bill out of his trousers. "Here," he said, holding it out to her.

She flounced past him unseeing, and shouted, at no one visibly present, a word that it grieved him to hear. He waved the dollar after her half-heartedly, but she was walking purposefully toward a cluster of disadvantaged-looking people crouched around the dumpster behind the restaurant's service door.

He wondered for a moment about everything being, in fact, patchable.

But perhaps she had some friends among them. Magic after all was like the bottles on the shelves of a dubious-neighborhood liquor store—it

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was available in different proofs and labels, and at different prices, for anyone who cared to walk in.

And sometimes it helped them. Perhaps obscurely.

He wasn't keen on revealing any of this business about magic to anyone who wouldn't understand; but, in his own case, when he was out in the garage working, he never felt quite right wearing anything else except his inventor's pants.

Somewhere he had read that Fred Astaire had worn a favorite pair of dancing shoes for years after they had worn out, going so far as to pad the interior with newspaper in between re-solings.

Well, Bernard Wilkins had his inventor's trousers, didn't he? And by damn he didn't care what the world thought about them. He scratched at a spot of egg yolk on a pocket and sucked at his teeth, clamping the toothpick against his lip.

Wilkins is the name, he thought with self-indulgent pomposity —invention's the game.

What he was inventing now was a way to eliminate garden pests. There was a sub-sonic device already on the market to discourage gophers, sure, and another patented machine to chase off mosquitoes.

Neither of them worked worth a damn, really.

The thing that *really* worked on gophers was a wooden propeller nailed to a stick that was driven into the ground. The propeller whirled in the wind, sending vibrations down the stick into the dirt. He had built three of them, big ones, and as a result he had no gopher trouble.

The tomato worms were working him over hard, though, scouring the tomato vines clean of leaves and tomatoes in the night. He sometimes found the creatures in the morning, heavy and long, glowing bright green with pirated chlorophyll and wearing a face that was far too mammalian, almost human.

The sight of one of them bursting under a tramping shoe was too horrible for any sane person to want to do it twice.

Usually what he did was gingerly pick them off the stems and throw them over the fence into his neighbor's yard, but they crawled back through again in the night, further decimating the leaves of his plants. He had replanted three times this season.

What he was working on was a scientific means to get rid of the things. He thought about the nets in his garage, and the boxes of crystal-growing kits he had bought.

Behind him, a car motor revved. A dusty old Ford Torino shot toward him from the back of the parking lot, burning rubber from the rear tires in a cloud of white smoke, the windshield an opaque glare of reflected sunlight. In sudden panic Wilkins scuffed his shoes on the asphalt, trying to reverse his direction, to hop back out of the way before he was run

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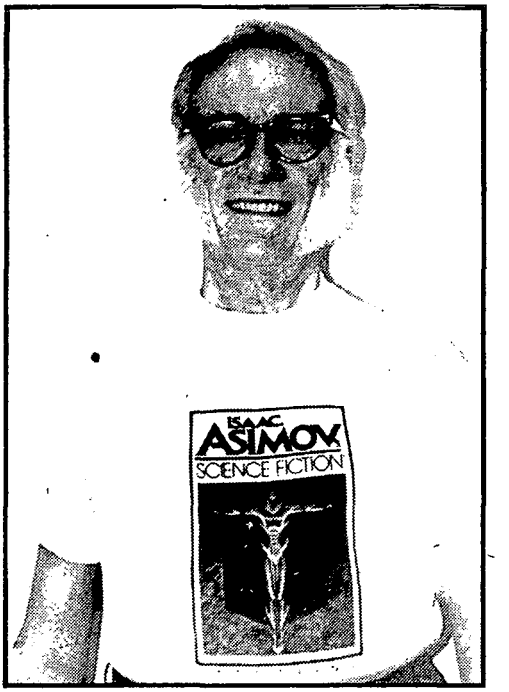

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down. The front tire nearly ran over his foot as he yelled and pounded on the hood, and right then the hooked post from the broken-off passenger-side mirror caught him by the key-chain and yanked his legs out from under him.

He fell heavily to the pavement and slid.

For one instant it was a contest between his inventor's pants and the car—then the waistband gave way and the inseam ripped out, and he was watching his popped-off shoes bounce away across the parking lot and his pants disappear as the car made a fast right onto Main.

License number! He scrabbled to his feet, lunging substantially naked toward the parking lot exit. There the car went, zigging away through traffic, cutting off a pickup truck at the corner. He caught just the first letter of the license, a G, or maybe a Q. From the mirror support, flapping and dancing and billowing out at the end of the snagged key-chain, his inventor's pants flailed themselves to ribbons against the street, looking for all the world as if the pantlegs were running furiously, trying to keep up with the car. In a moment the car was gone, and his pants with it.

The sight of the departing pants sent him jogging for his own car. Appallingly, the summer breeze was ruffling the hair on his bare legs, and he looked back at the restaurant in horror, wondering if he had been seen.

Sure enough, a line of faces stared at him from inside Norm's, a crowd of people leaning over the tables along the parking lot window. Nearly every recognizable human emotion seemed to play across the faces: surprise, worry, hilarity, joy, disgust, fear—everything but envy. He could hear the whoop of someone's laughter, muffled by the window glass.

One of his penny-loafers lay in the weeds of a flowerbed, and he paused long enough to grab it, then hurried on again in his stocking feet and baggy undershorts, realizing that the seat of his shorts had mostly been abraded away against the asphalt when he had gone down.

Son of a bitch, he thought, unconsciously echoing the raggedy woman's evaluation.

His car was locked, and instinctively he reached for his key chain, which of course was to hell and gone down Seventeenth Street by now. "Shit!" he said, hearing someone stepping up behind him. He angled around toward the front of the car, so as to be at least half-hidden from the crowd in Norm's.

Most of the faces were laughing now. People were pointing. He was all right. He hadn't been hurt after all. They could laugh like zoo apes and their consciences would be clear. Look at him run! A fat man in joke shorts! Look at that butt!

It was an old man who had come up behind him. He stood there now in the parking lot, shaking his head seriously.

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"It was hit and run," the old man said. "I saw the whole thing. I was right there in the window, and I'm prepared to go to court. Bastard didn't even look."

He stood on the other side of the car, between Wilkins and the window full of staring people. Someone hooted from a car driving past on Sixteenth, and Wilkins flinched, dropping down to his hands and knees and groping for the hide-a-key under the front bumper. He pawed the dirty underside of the bumper frantically, but couldn't find the little magnetic box. Maybe it was on the rear bumper. He damned well wasn't going to go crawling around after it, providing an easy laugh . . .

A wolf-whistle rang out from somewhere above, from an open window across Sixteenth. He stood up hurriedly.

"Did you get the license?" the old man said.

"What? No, I didn't." Wilkins took a deep breath to calm himself.

The goddam magnetic hide-a-key. It had probably dropped off down the highway somewhere. Wouldn't you know it! Betrayed by the very thing . . .

His heart still raced, but it didn't pound so hard. He concentrated on simmering down, clutching his chest with his hand. "Easy, boy," he muttered to himself, his eyes nearly shut. That was better. He could take stock now.

It was a miracle he wasn't hurt. If he was a skinny man the physical forces of the encounter would probably have torn him in half. As it was, his knee was scraped pretty good, but nothing worse than ten million such scrapes he had suffered as a kid. His palms were raw, and the skin on his rear-end stung pretty well. He felt stiff, too.

He flexed his leg muscles and rotated his arms. The wolfwhistle sounded again, but he ignored it.

Miraculously, he had come through nearly unharmed. No broken bones. Nothing a bottle of Ben Gay wouldn't fix, maybe some Bactine on the scrapes.

He realized then that he still had the toothpick in his mouth. Unsteadily, he poked at his teeth with it, hoping that it would help restore the world to normalcy. It was soft and splintered, though, and no good for anything, so he threw it away into the juniper plants.

"You should have got his license. That's the first thing. But I should talk. I didn't get it either." The old man looked back toward the window, insulted on Wilkins's behalf, scowling at the crowd, which had dwindled now. "Damned bunch of assholes . . ." A few people still stood and gaped, waiting to get another look at Wilkins, hoping for a few more details to flesh out the story they would be telling everyone they met for the next six weeks. Six months, more likely. It was probably the only story they

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had, the morons. They'd make it last forever. "Got your car keys, didn't they?"

Wilkins nodded. Suddenly he was shaking. His hands danced against the hood of his car and he sat back heavily on the high concrete curb of a planter.

"Here now," the old man said, visibly worried. "Wait. I got a blanket in the car. What the hell am I thinking?" He hurried away to an old, beaten Chevrolet wagon, opening the cargo door and hauling out a stadium blanket in a clear plastic case. He pulled the blanket out and draped it over Wilkins's shoulders.

Wilkins sat on the curb with his head sagging forward now. For a moment there he had felt faint. His heart had started to even out, though. He wanted to lie down, but he couldn't, not there on the parking lot.

"Shock," the old man said to him. "Accompanies every injury, no matter what. You live around here?"

Wilkins nodded. "Down on French Street. Few blocks."

"I'll give you a ride. Your car won't go nowhere. Might as well leave it here. You can get another key and come back down after it. They get your wallet, too?"

His wallet gone! Of course they had got his wallet. He hadn't thought of that. He wasn't thinking clearly at all. Well that was just fine. What was in there? At least thirty-odd dollars and his bank card and gas card and Visa—the whole magilla was gone.

The old man shook his head. "These punks," he said. "This is Babylon we're living in, stuff like this happens to a man."

Wilkins nodded and let the old man lead him to the Chevy wagon.

Wilkins climbed into the passenger seat, and the man got in and fired up the engine. He backed out terrifically slowly, straight past the window where a couple of people still gaped out at them. One of the people pointed and grinned stupidly, and the old man, winding down the window, leaned out and flipped the person off vigorously with both hands.

"Scum-sucking pig!" he shouted, then headed out down the alley toward Sixteenth, shaking his head darkly, one wheel bouncing down off the curb as he swerved out onto the street, angling up Sixteenth toward French.

"Name's Bob Dodge," the man said, reaching across to shake hands.

Wilkins felt very nearly like crying. This man redeems us all, he said to himself as he blinked at the Good Samaritan behind the wheel. "Bernard Wilkins," he said, shaking the man's hand. "I guess I'm lucky. No harm done. Could have been worse." He was feeling better. Just to be out of there helped. He had stopped shaking.

"Damn right you're lucky. If I was you I'd take it easy, though. Some-

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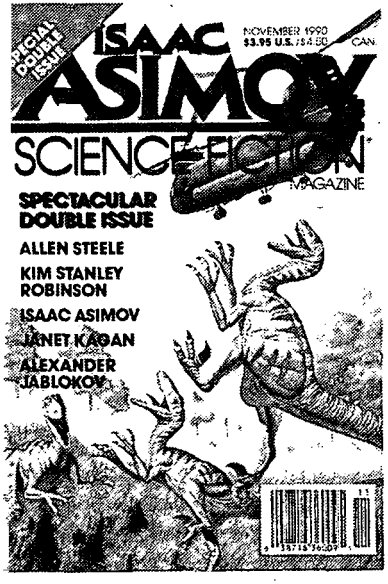

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times you throw something out of kilter, you don't even know it till later. Whiplash works that way."

Something out of kilter. Wilkins rejected the thought. "I feel . . . intact enough. Little bit sand-papered, that's all. If he'd hit me . . ." He sighed deeply; he didn't seem to be able to get enough air. "Take a right here. That's it—the blue house there with the shingles." The car pulled into the driveway, and Wilkins turned to the old man and put out his hand again. "Thanks," he said. "You want to step in for a moment, and I'll give you the blanket back. I could probably rustle up a cup of java."

"Naw. I guess I'll be on my way. I left a pal of mine back in the booth. Don't want to stiff him on the check. I'll see you down to Norm's one of these days. Just leave the blanket in the back of your car."

"I will."

Wilkins opened the car door, got out, and stood on the driveway, realizing for the first time that the blanket he was wearing had the California Angels logo on it, the big A with a halo. He watched Bob Dodge drive off. An Angels fan! He might have known it. Had he been there when Downing wrecked the big scoreboard? Wilkins hoped so.

Some destructions didn't matter, like the scoreboard, and those clear plastic backboards that the basketball players were routinely exploding a few years ago, with their energetic slamdunks. There were repairmen for those things, and the repairmen probably made more money in a week than Wilkins pulled down from Social Security in a year. He thought of his pants, beating against the street at forty miles an hour. Where were they now? Reduced to atoms? Lying in a ditch?

Hell.

He went in through the front door, and there was Molly, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. Her pleasant look turned at once to uncomprehending alarm.

"What—?" she started to say.

"Lost the pants up at Norm's," he said as breezily as he could. He grinned at her. This was what she had prophesied. It had come to pass. "A guy drove me home. No big deal!" He hurried past her, grinning and nodding, holding tight to the blanket so that she wouldn't see where his knee was scraped. He didn't want any fuss. "I'll tell you in a bit!" he called back, overriding her anxious questions. "Later! I've got to . . . damn it—" He was sweating, and his heart was thudding furiously again in his chest. "Leave me alone! Just leave me alone for a while, will you?"

There had to be something that could be salvaged. In his second-best pair of fancy-dinners pants he plodded past the washer and drier and down the back steps.

His back yard was deep, nearly a hundred feet from the back patio to

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the fence, the old boards of which were almost hidden under the branches and tendrils and green leaves of the tomato plants. Sometimes he worried about having planted them that far out. Closer to the house would have been safer. But the topsoil way out there was deep and good. Avocado leaves fell year round, rotting down into a dark, twiggy mulch. When he had spaded the ground up for the first time, he had found six inches of leafy humus on the surface, and the tomatoes that grew from that rich soil could be very nearly as big as grapefruit.

Still, it was awfully far out, way past the three big windmilling gopher repellers. He couldn't keep an eye on things out there. As vigilant as he was, the worms seemed to take out the tomatoes, one by one. He had put out a pony-pack of Early Girls first, back in February. It had still been too cold, and the plants hadn't taken off. A worm got five of the six one night during the first week in March, and he had gone back to the nursery in order to get more Early Girls. He had ended up buying six small Beefsteak plants too, from a flat, and another six Better Boys in four-inch pots, thinking that out of eighteen plants, plus the one the worms had missed, he ought to come up with something.

What he had now, in mid June, were nine good plants. Most of the Early Girls had come to nothing, the worms having savaged them pretty badly. And the Beefsteaks were putting out fruit that was deformed, bulbous, and off-tasting.

The Better Boys were coming along, though. He knelt in the dirt, patiently untangling and staking up vines, pinching off new leaves near the flower clusters, cultivating the soil around the base of the plants and mounding it up into little dikes to hold water around the roots. Soon he would need another bundle of six-foot stakes.

There was a dark, round shadow way back in there among the Better Boys, nearly against the fence pickets; he could make out the yellow-orange flush against the white paint. For a moment he stared at it, adjusting his eyes to the tangled shadows. It must be a cluster of tomatoes.

He reached his arm through the vines, feeling around, shoving his face in among them and breathing in the bitter scent of the leaves. He found the fence picket and groped around blindly until he felt them—

No. It.

There was only one tomato, one of the Better Boys, deep in the vines.

It was enormous, and it was only half ripe. Slowly he spread his hand out, tracing with his thumb and pinky finger along the equator of the tomato.

"Leaping Jesus," he said out loud.

The damned thing must have an eight inch diameter, ten inch, maybe. He shoved his head farther in, squinting into the tangled depths. He

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could see it better now. It hung there heavily, from a stem as big around as his thumb.

Knock, knock, he thought.

Who's there?

Ether.

Ether who?

Ether bunnies.

No ball game today, he thought. No crossword puzzle.

He backed out of the vines and strode purposefully toward the garage. He hadn't planned on using the ether nets this year, but this was a thing that needed saving. He could imagine the worms eyeing the vast Better Boy from their—what, nests? Lairs?—and making plans for the evening. Tying metaphorical napkins around their necks and hauling out the silverware.

He pulled open the warped garage door and looked at the big freezer in the corner and at the draped, fine-mesh nets on the wall. The crystals might or might not be mature, but he would have to use them tonight.

He had read the works of Professor Dayton C. Miller, who had been a colleague of Edward Williams Morley, and, like Miller, Wilkins had become convinced that Einstein had been wrong—light was *not* in any sense particles, but consisted of waves traveling through a medium that the nineteenth century physicists had called ether, the luminiferous ether.

"Luminiferous ether." He rolled the phrase across his tongue, listening to the magic in it.

Ordinary matter like planets and people and baseballs traveled through the ether without being affected by it. The ether passed through them like water through a swimming-pool net. But anything that *bent* light, anything like a magnifying glass, or a prism, or even a Coke bottle, *participated* with the ether a little, and so experienced a certain drag.

Molly had a collection of glass and crystal animals—people had offered her serious money for them, over the years—and Wilkins had noticed that in certain seasons some of them moved off of their dust-free spots on the shelf. The ones that seemed to have moved farthest were a set of comical rabbits that they had picked up in Atlantic City in—it must have been—1954. He had come to the conclusion that the effect occurred because of the angle and lengths of the rabbits' ears.

A correctly shaped crystal, he reasoned, would simply be stopped by the eternally motionless ether, and would be yanked off of the moving Earth like . . . like his pants had been ripped off of his body when the car-mirror post had hooked them.

And so he had bought a lot of crystal-growing kits at a local hobby store, and had "seeded" the Tupperware growing environments with

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spatially customized, rabbit-shaped forms that he'd fashioned from copper wire. It had taken him months to get the ears right.

The resulting crystalline silicon-dioxide shapes would not exhibit their ether-anchored properties while they were still in the refractive water—frozen water, at the moment—and he had not planned to put them to the test until next year.

But tonight he would need an anchor. There was the Better Boy to be saved. The year, with all of its defeats and humiliations, would not have been for nothing. He grinned to think about the Better Boy, hanging out there in the shadows, impossibly big and round. A slice of that on a hamburger . . .

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Samoa.

Samoa who?

Samoa ether bunnies.

He whistled a little tune, admiring the sunlight slanting in through the dusty window. The Early Girls and the misshapen Beefsteaks would have to be sacrificed. He would drape the nets under them. Let the worms feast on them in outer space if they had the spittle for it, as Thomas More had said.

Molly's Spanish aunt had once sent them a lacy, hand-embroidered bedspread. Apparently a whole convent-full of nuns had spent the bulk of their lifetimes putting the thing together. Frank *Sinatra* couldn't have afforded to buy the thing at the sort of retail price it deserved. Wilkins had taken great pains in laying the gorgeous cloth over their modest bed, and had luxuriated in lying under it while reading something appropriate—Shakespeare's sonnets, as he recalled.

That same night their cat had jumped onto the bed and almost instantly had vomited out a live tapeworm that must have been a yard long. The worm had convulsed on the bedspread, several times standing right up on its head, and in horror Wilkins had balled the bedspread up around the creature, thrown it onto the floor and stomped on it repeatedly, and then flung the bundle out into the yard. Eventually Wilkins and his wife had gone to sleep. That night it had rained for eight hours straight, and by morning the bedspread was something he'd been ashamed even to have visible in his trash.

When the obscuring ice melted, the rabbit-shaped crystals would be the floats, the equivalent of the glass balls that Polynesian fishermen apparently used to hold up the perimeters of their nets. The crystals would grab the fabric of the celestial ether like good tires grabbing

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pavement, and the lacey nets—full of tomato worms, their teeth in the flesh of the luckless Early Girls and Beefsteaks—would go flying off into space.

Let them come crawling back *then*, Wilkins thought gravely. He searched his mind for doubt but found none. There was nothing at all wrong with his science. It only wanted application. Tonight, he would give it that.

Still wearing his go-out-to-dinner pants, Wilkins expertly tied monkey-fist knots around the blocks of ice, then put each back into the freezer. Several times Molly had come out to the garage to plead with him to quit and come inside. He had to think about his health, she'd said. Remonstrating, he called it. "Don't *remonstrate* with me!" he shouted at her finally, and she went away in a huff. Caught up in his work, he simmered down almost at once, and soon he was able to take the long view. Hell, she couldn't be expected to see the sense in these nets and blocks of ice. They must seem like so much lunacy to her. He wondered whether he ought to wake her up around midnight and call her outside when the nets lifted off . . .

Luckily he had made dozens of the rabbit-forms. There would be plenty for the nets. And he would have to buy more crystal kits tomorrow.

Knock knock.
Who's there?
Consumption.
Consumption who?
Consumption be done about all these ether bunnies?
He laughed out loud.

By dinner-time he had fastened yellow and red twist ties around the edges of the nets. It would be an easy thing to attach the ether bunnies to the twist ties when the time was just right. He had spread the nets under all the tomato plants around the one that bore the prodigious Better Boy, pulling back and breaking off encumbering vines from adjacent plants. He hated to destroy the surrounding plants, but his eggs were all going into one basket here. If you were going to do a job, you did a *job*. Wasn't that what Casey Stengel always said? Halfway measures wouldn't stop a tomato worm. Wilkins had found that out the hard way.

Molly cooked him his favorite dinner—pork chops baked in cream of mushroom soup, with mashed potatoes and a vegetable medley on the side. There was a sprig of parsley on the plate, as a garnish, just like in a good restaurant. He picked it up and laid it on the tablecloth. Then, slathering margarine onto a slice of white bread and sopping up gravy

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with it, he chewed contentedly, surveying their kitchen, their domain. Outside, the world was alive with impersonal horrors. The evening news was full of them. Old Bob Dodge was right. This *was* Babylon. But with the summer breeze blowing in through the open window and the smell of dinner in the air, Wilkins didn't give a damn for Babylon.

He studied the plate-rack on the wall, remembering where he and Molly had picked up each of the souvenir plates. There was the Spokane plate, from the World's Fair in '74. And there was the Grand Canyon plate and the Mesa Verde one next to that, chipped just a little on the edge. What the hell did a chip matter? A little bit of Super-Glue if it was a bad one . . .

There was a magic in all of it—the plates on the wall, the little stack of bread-slices on the saucer, the carrots and peas mixing it up with the mashed potatoes. There was something in the space around such things, like the force-field dome over a lunar city in a story. Whatever it was, this magic, it held Babylon at bay.

He remembered the cat and the Spanish bedspread suddenly, and put his fork down. But hell—the ether bunnies, the saving of the enormous tomato—tonight things would go a different way.

He picked up his fork again and stabbed a piece of carrot, careful to catch a couple of peas at the same time, dredging it all in the mushroom gravy.

He would have to remember to put the stadium blanket into the trunk. Bob Dodge . . . : Even the man's name had a ring to it. If God were to lean out of the sky, as the Bible said He had done in times past, and say "Find me one good man, or else I'll pull this whole damned shooting match to pieces," Wilkins would point to Bob Dodge, and then they could all relax and go back to eating pork chops.

"More mashed potatoes?" Molly asked him, breaking in on his reverie.

"Please. And gravy."

She went over to the stove and picked up the pan, spooning him out a big mound of potatoes, dropping it onto his plate, and then pushing a deep depression in the middle of the mound. She got it just right. Wilkins smiled at her, watching her pour gravy into the hole.

"Salt?"

"Doesn't need it," he said. "It's perfect."

Molly canted her head and looked at him. "A penny?"

He grinned self-consciously. "For my thoughts? They're not worth a penny—or they're worth too much to stick a number on. I was just thinking about all this. About us." He gestured around him, at the souvenir plates on the wall and the plates full of food on the table.

"Oh, I see," she said, feigning skepticism.

"We could have done worse."

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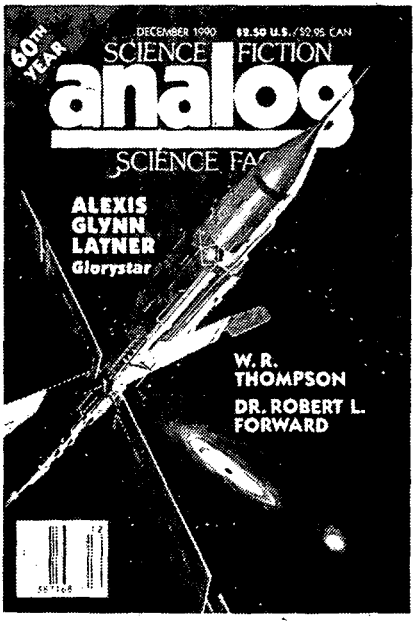

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She nodded as if she meant it. He nearly told her about the ether bunnies, about why he had bought the old freezer and the nets, about Einstein and Miller—but instead he found himself finally telling her about Norm's, about having nearly got run down in the parking lot. Earlier that day, when he had borrowed her keys and gone down to retrieve the car, she hadn't asked any questions. He had thought she was miffed, but now he knew that wasn't it. She'd just been giving him room to breathe.

"Sorry I shouted at you when I got home," he said when he had finished describing the ordeal. "I was pretty shook up."

"I guess you would be. I wish you would have told me, though. Someone should have called the police."

"Wouldn't have done any good. I didn't even get the guy's license number. Happened too fast."

"One of those people in Norm's must have got it."

Wilkins shrugged. Right then he didn't give a flying damn about the guy in the Torino. In a sense there had not *been* any guy in the Torino, just a . . . a force of nature, like gravity or cold or the way things go to hell if you don't look out. He hacked little gaps in his mashed potatoes, letting the gravy leak down the edges like molten lava out of a volcano, careful not to let it all run out. He shoveled a forkful into his mouth, and then picked up a porkchop, holding it by the bone, and nibbled off the meat that was left. "No harm done," he said. "A few bucks . . ."

"What you ought to have done after you'd got home and put on another pair of pants was drive up Seventeenth Street. Your pants are probably lying by the roadside somewhere, in a heap."

"First thing in the morning," he said, putting it off even though there was still a couple hours worth of daylight left.

But then abruptly he knew she was right. Of course that's what he should have done. He had been too addled. A man didn't like to think of that sort of embarrassment, not so soon. Now, safe in the kitchen, eating a good meal, the world was distant enough to permit his taking a philosophical attitude. He could talk about it now, admit everything to Molly. There was no shame in it. Hell, it *was* funny. If he had been watching out the window at Norm's, he would have laughed at himself, too. There was no harm done. Except that his inventor's pants were gone.

Suddenly full, he pushed his plate away and stood up.

"Sit and talk?" Molly asked.

"Not tonight. I've got a few things to do yet, before dark."

"I'll make you a cup of coffee, then, and bring it out to the garage."

He smiled at her and winked, then bent over and kissed her on the cheek. "Use the Melitta filter. And make it in that big, one-quart German stein, will you? I want it to last. Nothing tastes better than coffee with

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milk and sugar in it an hour after the whole thing has got cold. The milk forms a sort of halo on the surface after a while. A concession from the Brownian motion."

She nodded doubtfully at him, and he winked again before heading out the back door. "I'm just going down to Builders Emporium," he said at the last moment. "Before they close. Leave the coffee on the bench, if you don't mind."

Immediately he set out around toward the front, climbing into his car and heading toward Seventeenth Street, five blocks up.

He drove east slowly, ignoring the half a dozen cars angrily changing lanes to pass him. Someone shouted something, and Wilkins hollered, "That's right!" out the window, although he had no idea what it was the man had said.

The roadside was littered with rubbish—cans and bottles and disposable diapers. He had never noticed it all before, never really looked. It was a depressing sight. The search suddenly struck him as hopeless. His pants were probably caught on a tree limb somewhere up in the Santa Ana mountains. The police could put their best men on the search and nothing would come of it.

He bumped slowly over the railroad tracks, deliberately missing the green light just this side of the freeway underpass, so that he had to stop and wait out the long red light. Bells began to ring, and an Amtrak passenger train thundered past right behind him, shaking his car and filling the rear window with the sight of hurtling steel. Abruptly he felt cut off, dislocated, as if he had lost his moorings, and he decided to make a U-turn at the next corner and go home. This was no good, this futile searching.

But it was just then that he saw the pants, bunched up like a dead dog in the dim, concrete shadows beneath the overpass. He drove quickly forward when the light changed, the sound of the train receding into the distance, and he pulled into the next driveway and stopped in the parking lot of a tune-up shop closed for the night.

Getting out, he hitched up his dinner pants and strode back down the sidewalk as the traffic rushed past on the street, the drivers oblivious to him and his mission.

The pants were a living wreck, hopelessly flayed after having polished three blocks of asphalt. The wallet and keys were long gone.

He shook the pants out. One of the legs was hanging, pretty literally, by threads. The seat was virtually gone. What remained was streaked with dried gutter water. For a moment he was tempted to fling them away, mainly out of anger.

He didn't, though.

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Would a sailor toss out a sail torn to pieces by a storm? No he wouldn't. He would wearily take out the needle and thread, is what he would do, and begin patching it up. Who cared what it looked like when it was done? If it caught the wind, and held it. . . . A new broom sweeps clean, he told himself stoically, but an old broom knows every corner.

He took the pants with him back to the car. And when he got home, five minutes later, there was the cup of coffee still steaming on the bench. He put the pants on the corner of the bench top, blew across the top of the coffee, and swallowed a big slug of it, sighing out loud.

The moon was high and full. That would mean he could see, and wouldn't have to mess with unrolling the hundred foot extension cord and hanging the trouble-light in the avocado tree. And he was fairly sure that moonlight brought out the tomato worms, too. The hypothesis wasn't scientifically sound, maybe, but that didn't mean it wasn't right. He had studied the creatures pretty thoroughly, and had come to know their habits.

He set down the styrofoam ice chest containing the ice-encased ether bunnies, studied the nets for a moment, and then opened a little cloth-covered notebook, taking out the pencil clipped inside the spine. He had to gauge it very damned carefully. If he tied on the ice-encased bunnies too soon or too late, it would all come to nothing, an empty net ascending into the stratosphere. There was a variation in air temperature across the backyard—very slight, but significant. And down among the vines there was a photosynthetic cooling that was very nearly tempered by residual heat leaking out of the sun-warmed soil. He had worked through the calculations three times on paper and then once again with a pocket calculator.

And of course there was no way of knowing the precise moment that the worms would attempt to cross the nets. That was a variable that he could only approximate. Still, that didn't make the fine tuning any less necessary. All the steps in the process were vital.

He wondered, as he carefully wired the ether bunnies onto the nets, if maybe there wasn't energy in moonlight, too—a sort of heat echo, something even his instruments couldn't pick up. The worms could sense it, whatever it was—a subtle but irresistible force, possibly involving tidal effects. Well, fat lot of good it would do him to start worrying about that now. It clearly wasn't the sort of thing you could work out on a pocket calculator.

He struggled heavily to his feet, straightening up at last, the ice chest empty. He groaned at the familiar stiffness and shooting pains in his lower back. Molly could cook, he had to give her that. One of these days he would take off a few pounds. He wondered suddenly if maybe there

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weren't a couple of cold pork chops left over in the fridge, but then he decided that Molly would want to cook them up for his breakfast in the morning. That would be good—eggs and chops and sour-dough toast.

She had come out to the garage only once that evening, to remonstrate with him again, but he had made it clear that he was up to his neck in what he was doing, and that he wasn't going to give himself any rest. She had looked curiously around the garage and then had gone back inside, and after several hours she had shut the light off upstairs in order to go to sleep.

So the house was dark now, except for a couple of sconces burning in the living room. He could see the front porch light, too, shining through the window beyond them.

The sky was full of stars, the Milky Way stretching like a river through trackless space. He felt a sudden sorrow for the tomato worms, who knew nothing of the ether. They went plodding along, inexorably, sniffing out tomato plants, night after night, compelled by Nature, by the fleeing moon. They were his brothers, after a fashion. It was a hard world for a tomato worm, and Wilkins was sorry that he had to kill them.

He fetched a lawn chair and sat down in it, very glad to take a load off his feet. He studied the plants. There was no wind, not even an occasional breeze. The heavy-bodied tomato worms would make the branches dip and sway as they came along, cutting through the still night. Wilkins would have to remain vigilant. There would be no sleep for him. He was certain that he could trust the ether bunnies to do their work, to trap the worms and propel them away into the depths of space, but it was a thing that he had to see, as an astronomer had to wait out a solar eclipse.

He was suddenly hungry again. That's what had come of thinking about the pork chops. He was reminded of the tomato, nearly invisible down in the depths of the vines. How many people could that Better Boy feed, Wilkins wondered, and all at once it struck him that he himself was hardly worthy to eat such a tomato as this. He would find Bob Dodge, maybe, and give it to him. "Here," he would say, surprising the old man in his booth at Norm's. "Eat it well." And he would hand Dodge the tomato, and Dodge would understand, and would take it from him.

He got up out of his chair and peered into the vines. The ice was still solid. The night air hadn't started it melting yet. But the worms hadn't come yet either. It was too soon. He found a little cluster of Early Girls, tiny things that didn't amount to anything and weren't quite ripe yet. Carefully, he pulled a few of them loose and then went back to his chair, sucking the insides out of one of the tomatoes as if it were a Concord grape. He threw the peel away, tasting the still-bitter fruit.

"Green," he said out loud, surprised at the sound of his own voice and

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wishing he had some salt. And then, to himself, he said, "It's nourishing, though. Vitamin C." He felt a little like a hunter, eating his kill in the depths of a forest, or a fisherman at sea, lunching off his catch.

He could hear them coming. Faintly on the still air he could hear the rustle of leaves bending against vines, even, he'd swear, the *munch-munch* of tiny jaws grinding vegetation into nasty green pulp in the speckled moonlight. It was a steady sussuration—there must have been hundreds of them out there. Clearly the full moon and the incredible prize had drawn the creatures out in an unprecedented way. Perhaps every tomato worm in Orange County was here tonight to sate itself.

And the ice wasn't melting fast enough. He had miscalculated.

He forced himself up out of the lawn chair and plodded across the grass to the plants. He couldn't see them—their markings were perfect camouflage, letting them blend into the shifting patches of moonlight and shadow—but he could hear them moving in among the Early Girls.

Crouched against the vines, he blew softly on the ice blocks at the outside corners of the net. If only he could hurry them along. When they warmed up just a couple of degrees, the night air would really go to work on them. They'd melt quickly once they started. Abruptly he thought of heading into the garage for a propane torch, but he couldn't leave the tomato alone with the worms now, not even for a moment. He kept blowing. Little rivulets of water were running down the edges of the ice. Cheered at the sight of this, he blew harder.

Dimly, he realized that he had fallen to his knees.

Maybe he had hyper-ventilated, or else had been bent over so long that blood had rushed to his head. He felt heavy, though, and he pulled at the collar of his shirt to loosen it across his chest. He heard them again, close to him now.

"The worms!" he said out loud, and he reached out and took hold of the nearest piece of string-bound ice in both hands to melt it. He didn't let go of it even when he overbalanced and thudded heavily to the ground on his shoulder, but the ice still wasn't melting fast enough, and his hands were getting numb and beginning to ache.

The sound of the feasting worms was a hissing in his ears that mingled with the sound of rushing blood, like two rivers of noise flowing together into one deep stream. The air seemed to have turned cold, chilling the sweat running down his forehead. His heart was pounding in his chest like a pickaxe chopping hard into dirt.

He struggled up onto his hands and knees and lunged his way toward the Better Boy.

He could see them.

One of the worms was halfway up the narrow trunk, and two more

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were noodling in along the vines from the side. A cramp in his chest helped him to lean in closer, although he gasped at the pain and clutched at his shirt pocket. Now he could not see anything human or even mammalian in the faces of the worms, any more than he had been able to see the driver of the hit-and-run Torino behind the sun-glare on the windshield.

He made his hand stretch out and take hold of one of the worms. It held on to the vine until he really tugged, and then after tearing loose it curled in a muscular way in his palm before he could fling it away. In his fright and revulsion he grabbed the next one too hard, and it burst in his fist—somehow, horribly, still squirming against his fingers even after its insides had jetted out and greased Wilkins' thumb.

He spared a glance toward the nearest chunk of ice, but he couldn't see it; perhaps they were melting at last.

Just a little longer, he told himself, his breath coming quick and shallow. His hands were numb, but he seized everything that might have been a worm and threw it behind him. He was panting loud enough to drown out the racket of the feasting worms, and the sweat stung in his eyes, but he didn't let himself stop.

His left arm exploded in pain when he took hold of another one of the creatures, and he half believed the thing had somehow struck back at him, and then at that moment his chest was crushed between the earth and the sky.

He tried to stand, but toppled over backward.

Against the enormous weight he managed to lift his head—and he was smiling when he let it fall back onto the grass, for he was sure he had seen the edges of the nets fluttering upward as the ether bunnies, freed at last from the ice, struggled to take hold of the fabric of space—struggled inadequately, he had to concede, against the weight of the nets and the plants and the worms and the sky, but bravely nevertheless, keeping on tugging until it was obvious that their best efforts weren't enough, and then keeping on tugging even after that.

He didn't lose consciousness. He was simply unable to move. But the chill had gone away and the warm air had taken its place, and he was content to lie on the grass and stare up at the stars and listen to his heart.

He knew that it had probably been a heart attack that had happened to him—but he had heard of people mistaking for a heart attack what had merely been a seizure from too much caffeine. It might have been the big mug of coffee. He'd have to cut down on that stuff. Thinking of

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the coffee made him think of Molly asleep upstairs. He was glad that she didn't know he was down here, lying all alone on the dewy grass.

In and out with the summer night air. Breathing was the thing. He focused on it. Nothing else mattered to him. If you could still breathe you were all right, and he felt like he could do it forever.

When the top leaves of his neighbor's olive tree lit gold with the dawn sun he found that he could move. He sat up slowly, carefully, but nothing bad happened. The morning breeze was pleasantly cool, and crows were calling to each other across the rooftops.

He parted the vines and looked into the shadowy depths of the tomato plants.

The Better Boy was gone. All that was left of it was a long shred of orange skin dangling like a deflated balloon from its now foolish-looking stout stem. The ether bunnies, perhaps warped out of the effective shape by the night of strain, lay inert along the edges of the nets, which were soiled with garden dirt now and with a couple of crushed worms and a scattering of avocado leaves.

He was all alone in the yard—Molly wouldn't wake up for an hour yet—so he let himself cry as he sat there on the grass. The sobs shook him like hiccups, and tears ran down his face as the sweat had done hours earlier, and the tears made dark spots on the lap of his dinner pants.

Then he got up onto his feet and, still moving carefully because he felt so frail and weak, walked around to the front of the house.

The newspaper lay on the driveway. He nearly picked it up, thinking to take a look at the sports page. He had been so busy yesterday evening that he had missed the tail end of the ballgame. Perhaps the Angels had slugged their way into first place. They had been on a streak, and Wilkins wanted to think that their luck had held.

He turned and went into the silent house. He didn't want to make coffee, so he just walked slowly from room to room, noticing things, paying attention to trifles, from the bright morning sun shining straight in horizontally through the windows to the familiar titles of books on shelves.

He felt a remote surprise at seeing his inventor's pants on the top of the dirty clothes in the hamper in the bathroom, and he picked them up.

No wonder it had been late when Molly had finally turned out the bedroom light. She had sewn up or patched every one of the outrageous tears and lesions in the old pants, and now clearly intended to wash them. Impulsively he wanted to put them on right then and there . . . but he wouldn't. He would let Molly have her way with them, let her return

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the pants in her own good time. He would wear them again tomorrow, or the day after.

There was still a subtle magic in the morning.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Samoa.

He let the pants fall back onto the pile, and then he walked slowly, carefully, into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. He would make breakfast for her. ●

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ELIZABETH BEATTY
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

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THE SF EDITOR'S LAMENT

a song

by Joe Haldeman

When I was a lad fresh from editing school
The ink stains not dry on my vest....
I jumped at a job—such a silly young fool—
with a magazine far from the best.

This pulpy old rag printed stuff that would gag
A reader of Perry Rhodan!
Nine out of ten of their manuscripts
Followed the same general plans:

(Chorus) Oh, spare me the story of Adam and Eve
Who ascend from the shelter to breed.
And bloodthirsty stories of soldiering glory
Are stories I'd rather not read.
Werewolves that chew through a welter of grue;
Vampires who never can rest—
I'd make a deal with the Devil himself
To keep that stuff off of my desk.

I was "first reader," a sort of a greeter
For mutants from over the transom.
Stories retold from the stories of old
For rewards that were far less than handsome.
Stories that turn out to be just a dream—
Or dreams that turn out to be true!
Time-travel blather where someone's grandfather
Dies to surprise me and you.

Alien creatures from straight out of Shakespeare
Or Jung or some Freudian zoo....
A nuclear war could screw up your plans;
Robots can be human, too.

Communist monsters who make hell on earth,
Or rich people buy all the air!
Invaders from space enslave the whole race....
Somehow I'm ceasing to care.

(CHORUS)

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Every Monday I open my door
To a mountain of mouldering mail—
Manuscripts typed out with ribbons of gray
Repeating the same basic tales.

Rockets that zip and rayguns that zap,
Monsters that slobber and drip.
Some gifted authors get all the above
In one lousy manuscript.

Don't forget dragons and heros with flagons
Of mead, and a sword at their side.
Unicorns prancing and elves that go dancing,
And things that go "bump" in the night.

Cyberpunk ripoffs and vampires with AIDS
Fill one envelope out of three....
Something that's current, as well as cliché,
Is boring as boring can be!

(CHORUS)

One day in December I finally cracked
And swept all the crap off my desk.
I kicked it around all over the ground
Into an unholy mess.

Cackling madly, I picked up a handful
Of pages from out of the drift—
With gay abandon I stapled at random
And sent every writer a gift.

But a week or so later I started to get
Those weird stories back on my desk....
Vampires with rayguns and robots with AIDS
Fairies on spaceships who eat human flesh.

Desperate for stories, we started to print them—
These hybrids, completely insane!—
And waited for someone to close down our shop....
But no reader has ever complained.

So send me your stories of Adam and Eve;
I'll mix 'em with soldierly gore.
Grim starship troopers annihilate
Fairies and pixies of yore.
Vampires with rayguns stalk through the moonlight
For Frankenstein's Monster on Mars....
Werewolves in time machines go to the past
Where spaceships zoom out to the stars.

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Laurel is having a bad morning when Jerry brings her the gift. The pain is so bad she loses her shredded wheat within an hour after breakfast, but not bad enough to numb her completely, sweep her off into that suspended, solitary state of soul-annihilation.

This really pisses her off. And she dreamed again of the great ox, the sacrifice and the pipe and drums, the awful blood.

Plus she is bleeding again, staining her clothes and bedding like a teenager who doesn't understand her changing body. Laurel's body is changing, too, and at this late date more mysteriously, irretrievably, than she or the doctors can understand.

What a weird shitty world this is, she's thinking, when Jerry knocks on her door. So she lets ol' Jere have it, and she doesn't give a damn when his big brown eyes mist over and his womanly lips twitch.

"What the fuck is this?" she says, chucking the box he's brought on top of the litter of death books strewn on the coffee table. The box is small, oblong, neatly wrapped in bright red, flowery paper. The box looks like a birthday present, a holiday offering, a lipsticked smile, and she hates it, she doesn't give a damn what's inside.

"A gift, Laurel." He quietly goes about his business, but she can tell he's appalled at how awful she looks.

"*A gift?* A gift implies tomorrow. A gift suggests hope. You're not supposed to encourage my hope, now are you, Jerry? Kübler-Ross, Chapter 12. It's cruel to encourage hope, when there is no goddamn hope."

He flinches at her anger. "Everyone needs hope. Even you, Laurel. Even now."

"Oh, especially fucking *now*."

"Want your shot?" He turns away with his so-be-a-bitch patience. What a saint this guy is, and his own lover mysteriously, irretrievably dying of AIDS.

He trots out his little black bag; actually, Jerry's is sky blue. He's not a doctor. She wouldn't let him in her house if he were. Fucking doctors, with their six-figure lifestyles and their dreadful incompetence, their absurd impotence in the face of diseases they ought to have cured by now. No, the hospice authorizes homecare nurses to dispense all sorts of fun drugs to people who won't live long enough to become dope-crazed menaces to society.

Want your shot, your hit, your high, Laurel baby? Hey, sounds like her days in Haight-Ashbury when she was a twenty-year-old old-lady painting psychedelic posters for rock bands. Day-glo pink hearts, electric-blue tears. Damn, she was cool. She tied a leather headband around her hair. She laced Greek sandals up to her knees.

"Hell, I guess so," Laurel says.

Morphine is Dolly Dagger, Lady Dreamknife, junkie stuff. Oh, her wild

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days in Haight-Ashbury when they'd pop a pill because it was a pretty color. Now she is afraid of such soul-annihilation. She is afraid of Dolly Dagger.

Afraid of the dream that sometimes comes when she yields to morphine: a great ox heavy with dumb life brought before a fevered assembly. Drums and pipes and chants, crazed eyes rimmed with blue and black. A shining scythe brought down on the captive neck, bellows of rage and pain, and blood, and the great head rolling, falling, how this disgusts and terrifies her, a head wild-eyed with fear and pain and horror . . .

He preps her.

"You really should go up to San Rafael," Jerry says. "I'm only thinking of you, it would be easier for you."

"I want to die at home," she says. He nods, does not want to meet her eyes. "I don't want to be trapped in some sanitized bed in a sanitized clinic. I don't want some nameless night nurse to find me. After so much indignity, I must finally claim my own dignity."

"Then you're going to have to learn how to shoot it up yourself," Jerry says flatly. "Learn soon. Because I can't be here every time you need it. And you're going to need it more and more, Laurel."

"What if the goddamn champagne-sipping doctors, what if they find a cure tomorrow, Jere, a new radiation therapy, a DNA mutation like the AIDS cure they're working on in Europe. *Something*. It could happen; it could happen! Couldn't it?"

"What if? Sure. What if could always happen. But never does." Then he plunges her arm with the tenderness of the angels, like shooting up hard drugs is an act of grace.

Laurel sits on her deck and watches the world slide by. Mr. Oake jogs past her vista; he even has the nerve to wave. Mr. Oake must be eighty-two years old and he jogs like a cartoon in slow motion: his skinny-flabby arms swing back and forth, his skinny-bony legs pump up and down, sweat rolls into his red terry cloth headband. But he hardly gets anywhere, he practically jogs in place. He moves down East Blithedale at an absurd snail's pace.

Laurel doesn't wave back. Mr. Oake is useless to society. He is probably living off the public dole. He will never do anything else with his mediocre old life except jog by her deck and drive her crazy with the uselessness of it all.

Why her? Why not a useless old man nearly double her age? She is talented, she is forty-five, she has so much left to give. She has a whole life left. Why *her?*

She sees the Collins girl stride by, too. The girl doesn't wave. If she sees Laurel sitting there, she doesn't give a damn, but Laurel suspects

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she doesn't notice her at all. The girl must be sixteen or seventeen, a lean little oblivious bitch oozing with hormones and hostility. She has the kind of thick, wavy, below-the-shoulder hair Laurel had before chemo stripped that from her, too.

Only forty-five. Not young; but not *old,* either, damn it. Until six months ago, she was doing okay. Packaging, ad agency work, shit work really, hustle hustle hustle. But she was waiting, saving up a bit, dreaming of the day she could chuck it all and do what *she* wanted to do. Go back to her art. Electric-blue tears were only the beginning. Why did she never go past the tears?

It is her own damn fault, her own procrastination.

They told her she had ovarian cancer.

So stupid. She'd smoked for twenty, twenty-five years. The lungs ought to be the first to go, but no. There is this stupid statistic about women who smoke. The lungs go, certainly, but these women also have a high incidence of cervical and ovarian cancer. Something about concentration of nicotine on the fingers, touching, for one purpose or another, there.

Humiliating. She'd started to bleed off and on; yes, she denied it. She'd been bleeding for two months straight and aching with the worst cramps she'd ever felt when she broke down and went to the doctors.

Fucking doctors. They couldn't tell that her father had a blockage until a heart attack killed him while he was driving to the office on a sunny Monday morning. They couldn't save her mother when a stroke knifed her brain. They couldn't help her make a baby with Christopher before he bailed out of their marriage.

She has had enough grief in the last five, six years.

So she could not believe it. So she smoked; take her at seventy-five when she's a crazy old Nevelson or an O'Keefe stashed away in her Mill Valley chalet. A Lillian Hellman type with withered scarlet lipstick and mascaraed crows-feet, a full life of drinking and smoking and man-chasing behind her, and a masterpiece or two to her credit.

Would you believe there is nothing more they can do for you, and you're only forty-five?

When her father died, she cried because she never really knew him. When her mother died, she cried because she knew her only too well. When her fetuses miscarried, she cried because she would never have the chance to know or not know them.

Her past, her present, her future; she can't cry for them anymore. There are no tears left for Laurel.

She feels better after Jerry leaves the way lifting therapeutic pressure off a throbbing nerve calms the trauma. She'll have to remember to tell

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him next time. An emotional tourniquet, ol' Jere, that's what you are, man. She hardly ever has something even halfway good to tell him.

Next time. Does she have the right to think about next time? Jerry comes to see her, administers her morphine like a real gentleman, *plus* gives her a gift, and she acts like an asshole. That's just great. "To Laurel," he'll say at her funeral. He'll be crying. "We all loved her very much, but God, she could be a bitch."

She picks up the merry red box from the coffee table. The Egyptian Book of the Dead lies beneath it. She tears open the thick wrapping paper.

Jerry's gift is a hummingbird feeder. A Droll Yankee. It is a pale green plastic flying saucer with bright red plastic flower decals mounted over the feeding holes, a bright red plastic circle on top, an elegant brass rod with a curved hook top. You boil three parts water to one part white granulated sugar and let cool. You pour the cooled nectar up to the metal band. You hang the feeder from a tree branch or, in Laurel's case, with great and painful effort, you slide open your screen door, you take down the browning spider plant, you hang the feeder from the macramé planter-holder nailed to the roof over the deck.

Jerry's gift box also contains a tiny, hand-printed book on care and maintenance of the feeder, lore on birds in general and hummingbirds in particular. Jewels of the air, the book calls them. Hummers.

Hummers? Laurel has seen hummingbirds on TV, in National Geographic videos, as illustrations on greeting cards, wrought in crystal as Christmas ornaments. Maybe once or twice for real, but only from afar. Quick magical creatures hovering around fuchsia, disappearing into the foliage before her eyes could focus. Look! What was that?

According to the book, hummingbirds are plentiful in northern California. They're everywhere, in downtown Oakland, on San Francisco's Telegraph Hill, in Mill Valley arbors. They've been around her all this time, and she's never really *seen* them!

Such a simple pleasure of life, coming at this late date. Oh, to see a hummer from her deck, so close. Please!

She scans her view with new eyes. Across East Blithedale stand ancient California date palms, fragrant eucalyptus, sturdy pine trees, weeping willows, brilliant fuchsia, strange cacti with fleshy, alien fingers. That glorious northern California arbor; she's sketched it many times. How she cursed the arbor yesterday, raged at its exuberance; damn palms would witness her death, fucking cacti would outlive her.

But now, as she waits and she watches, something strange and disturbing and wonderful happens: the fringes of the palm fronds fall away, and disembodied arms reach to the sky. The gray-barked eucalyptus turn translucent; within stand decapitated torsos of men, their purple-blue

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hearts beating brown blood into the branches. Green-haired maidens bow and bob among the willows, sweep elegant fingers in obeisance to the earth. Fuchsia blossoms form voluptuous lips that whisper vermilion secrets to the wind. The cacti impatiently await some signal to pull up their knobby feet and hop away.

She waits and she watches, first fears replaced by fascination, and hours tick by. The arbor darkens. But no hummer comes. The little pale green plastic flying saucer sways in the Pacific breeze, lonely and alone, like a broken promise. The tiny book says she may have to wait a month before hummingbirds will discover her feeder.

Hummers, I may not have a month. God damn you, hummers. Don't be one more disappointment to me.

Laurel goes inside, surrenders to exhaustion. Sleep; after the hell of chemotherapy failed, she was afraid to sleep. Now more and more she welcomes it, the little brother of death.

On principle she should curse all hummingbirds. But you know what? She cannot curse them. Jewels of the air, she promises as she sinks into sleep, I will wait for you as long as I can.

This decision to wait without anger or bitterness gives her a strange sense of peace. She slides into dreams of beating wings.

Beating wings shooting rainbows off their fringes and a presence: huge calm eyes rimmed with blue and black, a fan of dark hair, breasts, a spangled body arching . . .

Laurel wakes, and a woman wearing a dress like the night sky bends over her. She always has been terrified of intruders, especially since she has become so physically helpless, and she should be terrified now, but she isn't, though she realizes that the woman is not bending over her, she is floating. The floating woman looks at her, eye to eye, before she disappears into the ceiling.

It is four in the morning. This hour has got to be the loneliest and most profound of the twenty-four. No one in their right mind is up at four in the morning, not even the birds.

Disturbed, disoriented, she rises. She isn't bleeding, but pain socks her in the gut the moment she stands up. A sudden wallop like nothing she's felt before. *Now* she is terrified. Laurel, this is It.

But this isn't It. She doesn't even pass out or fall back on the bed. She stands there in the night, clutching her stomach. Morphine? She finds the kit Jerry left her. She is shaky and clumsy and rips the hell out of her arm, but she finally manages to do it. Then, repulsed but not beaten by her own cowardice, she grips the walls like a blind woman, goes into the moonlit living room, and sits down with her death books.

Laurel never thought much about death before. She never knew her

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grandparents; death hadn't touched her. Oh, she philosophized about it with her freaky friends when they were twenty and smoking doo in Golden Gate Park. Initiation, man; wow, the Trip of All. She read an interview with Rod Serling that took place two months before the man died. The interviewer had asked the fantasist what he thought happened, and he said: nothing. You just go off into nothing. No Willoughby, no Owl Creek, no next reality in a dark alley with jazz in the air. Then his heart gave out at age fifty. Mr. Serling smoked twenty, twenty-five years, Laurel recalls.

Twilight Zonish speculations always appealed to her; Mr. Serling's bleakness did not. And then her father and her mother and the children she could never have; death caught up with her.

It was sometime after her mother's death that she began to collect Madame Blavatsky and the works of the Golden Dawn, the Theosophists, the Rosicrucians. Carl Jung, Edinger, and their various disciples of metapsychology. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross for clinical details. Out-of-the-body experiences, near-death experiences; many modern works of varying quality on these topics. And an ancient text: The Egyptian Book of the Dead.

The modern philosophers and psychologists and therapists are as enlightened and humane and cool as they can be. But they are too clinical for Laurel, too willing to concede the finiteness of human existence. She likes *Fate* magazine, the column, "My Proof of Survival." The column is comprised of anecdotes from humble readers: "Dad Knocked On The Wall;" "Mama's Last Kiss;" "Boodles Said Goodbye." Boodles was a poodle. Laurel is amazed at how many people's pets visit them from the grave and reassure them the soul survives. Even Boodles's soul.

She wants to see the long tunnel, the white light. Maybe her mother will greet her there, ready with a scolding for her latest mistake. She wants details. She wants instructions, damn it.

Maybe that's why that strange ancient text, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, is so perversely thrilling to her.

She plays the book oracle with it more than any other death book. Book oracle: you close your eyes, turn the book over and under, around and around, then flip the pages, plunge your index finger down.

This is how she finds elegant hieroglyphs and sloe-eyed god-animals, ceremonies and strictures, prescriptions and proscriptions. There is a weird ring of truth to these. As though death is just another reality. So when you emerge from the other side, you've got to roll up your sleeves and master it. She likes the idea; that it's possible to master the inevitable.

Survival of the soul flies in the face of all known science. But Laurel can't help but wonder if there could be something to the great journey.

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Whether the ancients could have understood life and death more completely than their confused and frightened progeny five thousand years later.

Dawn shifts through a leaden mist, and Laurel sees her first hummer. She feels okay, not sick, not great, just *compressed*. Like she's squeezed more tightly into herself; like how a trash compactor crunches down garbage. This image cracks her up; isn't that the truth, this body such a piece of crap? She is laughing to herself when she sees a tiny presence flitting around the feeder.

It is the tiniest bird she has ever seen. It cannot be more than three inches from head to tail. In the dim morning light, she can see a glint of scarlet wreathing its throat, a gleam of green sliding down its back. Its long, slim beak dips into the hole at the center of one red plastic flower atop the feeder. She is so close she can see the tendril of its tongue extruding from the tip of its beak, lapping up the sugar water. It dips, sips, levitates and hovers, beady bird eyes casting quick glances about. It darts down and around to the next plastic flower, hovers, dips, and samples the same sugar water from a different hole. She can see the blurred upbeat of its wings simultaneously with an image of their downstroke, so that the hummer appears to be transported by four ghostly wings. The tiny tail beats furiously up and down, forming a fan of optical illusions.

She is still catching her breath when the hummer darts away, disappearing like magic into the morning mist.

She scrambles through the pile of death books, finds her tiny, hand-printed book. No, he could not have been a ruby-throated hummingbird; they live only east of the Mississippi. He must have been a male Allen's hummingbird; the scarlet gorget, the green back, the neat fan tail. A California coastal hummer, all right.

Laurel goes out on her deck and sits, despite the chill. Mr. Oake jogs by, waves. God, he jogs at six in the morning *and* six in the evening? The creaky old bastard, what did he ever do to deserve . . . but she finds herself swallowing her bitterness. She doesn't exactly return his wave, but she nods, and he nods back. A gonzo jogger at eighty-two, with twenty-twenty vision, too.

She sits there for hours, shivering in the morning mist, and no more hummers come. But she is not distressed. They will. More hummers will come.

Jerry gets all concerned about the sudden wallop of pain. Laurel realizes right away that her big mouth and her bitching have gone too far this time, and she tries to soft soap it. No big deal, Jere, she tells him;

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so what else do you want to hear from me? I'm fine, I'm okay, just leave me *alone*.

But he doesn't leave her alone. He drags her off in an ambulance and throws her to the doctors at San Rafael Cancer Clinic.

As usual, the doctors strap her down and peer into her and intrude on her dignity. No, her bowels have not been irregular; her bowels have not been functioning at all, why the hell should they? She hardly eats.

It turns out the cancer has metastasized into her colon. She asks, does this mean I can smoke again? The poor young doctor, some kid she's never seen before, looks at her with such pity that she laughs out loud. No, I'm not kidding, she says. I loved to smoke; can I smoke now?

And believe it or not, she forgives the poor young doctor. She forgives all the fucking doctors. Yes, she really does. What percentage of doctors will wind up with shit for guts some day? The bastards have no special guarantee, now do they? Radon gas could infiltrate your house for years, the electric blanket could tear apart your white blood cells, electromagnetic radiation from a PC could devour your mucus membranes.

Or you could smoke and drink and be merry until you're eighty-two years old.

On the way home—Laurel demanded they let her go home—the only thing she can do to make Jerry smile is tell him about hummers.

"The Portuguese call them flower-kissers. The color at the gorget—the throat area—is due not just to actual pigmentation of the feather, but to structural color, iridescence reflecting off facets of the feather itself. Like a gemstone, Jere. Hummer homes in zoos worldwide are called jewel rooms. Isn't that wonderful?"

"I know you don't like the clinic, Laurel . . ."

"I *hate* the fucking clinic. Did you know hummingbirds strip abandoned spider webs for nest material?"

"You refuse another try at surgery, refuse another try at chemo. That's your choice. I respect your choice. But there is more they could do for you, and I've got to say it: you're wrong to reject help, Laurel."

"They eat half their weight in sugar a day. When they get excited, their heartbeat doubles to over a thousand beats per minute!"

"Laurel, please. You're very sick. Much sicker than before. Do you know that?"

"Jerry, I know. Don't make me say more than that, because I can't. I'll deal with being sicker. Okay?"

"Not okay. I worry. You're so alone in this place."

"I'm not alone, Jere. I've got hummers."

She gets to know them.

There is the gorgeous male Allen's hummer. His mate is plainer, but

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no less thrilling in her aerial acrobatics, her negotiation of the feeder, her sheer delicacy and verve. As days go by, Laurel notices she carries two jelly bean-sized eggs in her lower abdomen. This gives Laurel such irrational joy that she gets out her sketchpad and pastels and starts to draw for the first time in months.

There is an aggressive Anna's hummer with a brilliant rosy-red head. He goes *chup-chup-chup!* when he sees other hummers at the feeder, the tiniest, tinny chirp she's ever heard, but unmistakably macho, territorial. If the other hummers don't dart away, he swoops down and chases them in frenetic loop-the-loops back to the arbor.

There is a laid-back black-chinned hummer who perches atop the brass ring from which the feeder is hung or lazily sits on the rim of the feeder itself and sups on sugar water.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead is replete with elegant hieroglyphs of birds. The solar hawk of Horus, Thoth's sacred ibis, vultures, and buzzards signifying the terrible aspect of divine power that purifies putrefactions of the world.

Laurel shivers, riffles the strange pages. Other fragments of myth, other images: Isis, that enigmatic goddess who is the mother and the sister *and* the lover of God, loses her husband Osiris to a spectacularly painful death, seeks him through the world and underworld, and finds—in a peculiar twist of mythic plot—his dismembered corpse embedded inside a living tree.

The eucalyptus with their translucent trunks; whose heart beats there, sends brown blood into the branches? Whose arms reach to the sky within the fronds of palms?

And more: the ceremony of Opening the Mouth and the Eyes during which oxen or fowl were beheaded, their sacrificial blood daubed upon the mouth and eyes of the body of the deceased, signifying renewed wholeness, magical restoration. Restoration in the Land of the Dead.

But this too is shocking, reminiscent. Of what? Laurel recalls the recurring morphine dream, the great sacrifice. Her own horror; why?

Why: because the death is not the poor dumb ox's; it's hers. Because the sacrifice is hers. Can she accept that?

Evening: rose gold shafts of sunset, scents of eucalyptus and fireplaces. Laurel goes out on her deck, with sketchpad and pastels and a bottle of good fumé blanc. Cars careen over Highway 101 from San Francisco, seeking solace in Mill Valley, if they can find solace without a fatal crash. They are like ants, all these cars, scurrying to some blind instinct of survival.

As Mr. Oake jogs his comical way up the avenue, something even more hilarious happens: the concrete turns into a ribbon of rippling silver water. But Mr. Oake doesn't sink; no, he stands on a flatbed barge slowly

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forging its way upstream. From his terry cloth headband extrude scarlet serpentine heads. His jogging shorts become a gilt loincloth, his sweaty T-shirt an embroidered breastplate. Instead of his silly standing-in-place jogging, Mr. Oake floats majestically up East Blithedale. The pumping of his skinny-flabby arms mimics priestly exhortations to the setting sun.

Fear flutters up Laurel's spine; she has been dancing with Dolly Dagger, after all. But she is an artist, isn't she? That destiny must bring some small ecstasies, along with the agonies. Could she be tapping into an archetypal pool, the mythos within the Egyptian Book of the Dead?

All right! At once she accepts the silver waves lapping at the lip of her deck. She feverishly tries to capture Mr. Oake's majestic journey with her pastels. All right; East Blithedale is the great river, she the maker of hieroglyphs.

But the waves grow quiet, the concrete firms, the magic flees. Or so it seems.

As she watches and sketches, a hummer zooms up to the feeder above her deck. The aggressive male Anna's, with his flashy hood of red. She flips the page, tries to sketch him, too, when another hummer comes.

He startles her.

Chup-chup-chup! and the Anna's spirals away. The new hummer; he is a dusky charcoal gray, strangely dark even in the evening light. She can see at once that his head is pale, round, oblong. She keeps blinking her eyes, straining to see.

This hummer doesn't have a beak!

He hovers there, not sipping sugar water. He's got a tiny, round, flat pale face, eyes that are not bird eyes, and wrinkles, she is quite sure she can see wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, streaks of pale gray over his crown. He looks directly at her and nods his tiny head, then darts away into the twilight arbor.

She is stunned. The archetypal pool; is she drowning in its delusions? No! She *saw* him, saw the hummer only too clearly, not more than two feet away from where she sits. She slaps her sketchpad shut and staggers inside.

She collapses on the couch, sinks into the exhausted sleep morphine permits. Hypnogogics: she sees the ox and the ax, his helpless head, how his rage imbues the sacrificial blood with the dumb will to survive.

And dreams of flashing red lights. She flutters, blinded, beating furiously, before them. She keeps hearing over and over the sound of sirens wailing in the night.

Jerry is red-eyed and puffy-faced. For once Laurel is the one remarking on how awful he looks.

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"David died last night," Jerry says.

David is Jere's lover of fifteen years. Two dapper gents with a spectacular townhouse in Diamond Heights, trips abroad, good taste and success, perhaps an extra-relationship affair or two like any other long-term couple. Until David, a forty-seven-year-old stockbroker, tested positive and started down that slow cruel road of no return.

"We loved each other very much," Jerry says.

But Laurel doesn't know how she can comfort him. In a weird way, she envies the Jerrys and Davids of the world. They got what they wanted. She and Christopher, they coupled blindly, with expectations that could not be fulfilled, and they failed.

"I bet David is pissed." This is all she can say in a brittle voice. "I bet he and the others will be waiting to beat the crap out of the first doctor who comes over to the other side and didn't have the balls to try the DNA mutation, FDA testing be damned."

He looks at her with those big brown eyes, like, gee, Laurel, a bitch to the very end and fucking crazy, too. Then a deep-down look like yeah, this makes sense to him. Or maybe nothing makes sense to him anymore.

"Hey," he says. "You know that old guy up the street from you? The one you call The Ancient Jogger?"

"Mr. Oake?"

"He died last night. Heart failure. Eighty-four years old, isn't that something? While we're on the Big D, thought I'd better tell you since you knew him."

"Oh hell, I didn't know him. God; I guessed eighty-two. Well, at least you're holding down the fort, Jere."

"I tested positive last week," he says.

Laurel uncorks chenin blanc at ten in the morning. Jerry declines a cigarette; Laurel chainsmokes four. They talk about their wild youths and their almost-as-wild middle years. Is living to old age such a great idea after all? they joke.

Jerry leaves at noon. Laurel lies down on the couch. She is dizzy from the wine. Her mouth tastes like ashes. She keeps seeing a tiny, wrinkled face, eyes that are not bird eyes.

Dark, beating wings fill her dreams.

Birds throughout antiquity symbolize the human soul, Laurel reads in the tiny, hand-printed book. Playing the book oracle, she finds significant passages. The Latin *aves* means both bird and ancestral spirit. In the Rig-Veda, the bird of Savitri is the Higher Self that struggles for expression, seeking freedom from the cage of mundane life. Birds, like angels, are emissaries between heaven and earth. Birds are symbols of thought, imagination, aspiration, spiritual longing, the swiftness of

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cosmic creativity. Birds are possessors of occult secrets. Birds are givers of omens.

Laurel smokes a cigarette with great pleasure out on her deck. It is five o'clock on a Saturday night, and she's got a bottle of cabernet sauvignon sitting next to her chair. She took morphine earlier. She's started coughing like when she smoked three packs a day, that deep-chested hack that usually tells the average moron to quit. Laurel, she tells herself, you are not the average moron anymore, hell no, so she lights another and picks up a beautiful pastel called dusty rose.

The Collins girl strides by in her usual adolescent huff, bound for her family's house on East Blithedale. Oh, those angry dark eyes, the pinched face that would be pretty if she didn't scowl so much.

But instead of envying the girl's youth and rebel vitality, Laurel decides to transform her on the sketchpad. Now goes earnest young royalty, crowned with her long and lovely hair, off to quest among the eucalyptus and date palms.

Laurel has seen twenty-five hummers today. She keeps a separate page in her sketchpad where she ticks off each sighting in groups of four short lines slashed by a fifth. Tick! Five groups of five.

This gives her focus, keeps her alert, lets her forget herself from time to time: keeping track of hummingbird sightings.

Despite the morphine and the wine and the cigarettes, she can feel a heavy dull pain in this body of hers. Not just in the gut, but all over, everywhere. She is not pissed off anymore. She is not entirely without the bitterness, no, and not entirely resigned. But she is aware of a turning away from the world. She unplugged the phone jack. She turned off the thermostat. She dumped old food, rotting alfalfa sprouts, from the refrigerator. She made her bed for the first time in months, sheets and blankets tucked in neatly at the corners, turned down at the top, as though for guests.

What a glory to sip wine and smoke and sketch just like the independent, eccentric, successful artist she once fantasized she would be one day. In a weird way, she feels this is it: she has made it. Here is Laurel, working on sketches for a major new fantasy triptych; "Princess of the Arbor," she decides to call it. Now sits the Mill Valley artist, observing hummingbirds from her deck.

The light changes and changes again. The black-chin is sitting on his perch, the flamboyant Allen's is flitting nearby. The two commence squabbling—*chup-chup-chup!*—being belligerent little bastards . . .

. . . when she sights another strange dark hummer, its gorget sparkling black the way obsidian gleams. Like any hummer, it zooms up to the feeder, scaring away the others, and hovers there.

Her heart beats at the sight of the dark bird. Dusk again, although

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she immediately intuits that dusk has nothing to do with the hummer's appearance.

She stares until her eyes tear; fear clouds her vision. She blinks, stares again, and this is what she sees: a tiny dark bird body hovering; the fantastic wings, the illusion of simultaneous upbeat and downbeat, a black lace fan so fast is the movement; an ebony wedge of tail bobbing like a frenetic ballast.

And a delicate, rounded, flat-sided head with a face: the face of a sulky adolescent girl. And more: the illusion of long and lovely hair spilling down around sloping bird shoulders.

So tiny. So fantastic! Charming in the way all hummers are infinitely charming.

But ominous: The sparkling black feathers, the tiny, pale face, its soft dark eyes almost wistful. No, impossible! Laurel wishes she could deny her perception like she's denied so many other things.

The hummer disappears into the arbor from which sunset flees in shafts of dusty rose.

A long, cold shudder makes her drop the sketchpad and pastels, reach for the woolen shawl draped over the back of her chair. The heavy, dull gut-pain throbs, but she does not move. She sits on her deck, snuggles into the shawl, and smokes and drinks and smokes some more. And waits.

There is something Laurel must witness here tonight. She dozes and wakes, shivers as the fog rolls in, and dreams of a river like a shining silver ribbon.

The sirens come at last after midnight. So close and shrill and jarring that Laurel wakes up at once, painfully knocking her left knuckles against the side of the chair. The Collins house. A green and white ambulance, two squad cars. Crackle of static, the bland, doom-filled voice of police radio garbled in the night. "One five zero, one five zero; we uh have a *shsh* at *shsh* East Blithedale; uh confirmed; attempted suicide, female, seventeen years old . . ."

The mother is sobbing, the father paces hopelessly, and they bring her out on a stretcher with a tube up her nose, tubes in her arm. They shove her into the ambulance, slam the doors, race off, sirens wailing.

But Laurel can tell from how the paleness of her sulky face surrenders to the paleness of the sheets that she will fly away tonight.

Becoming a bird in visionary trance is a widespread symbol of initiatory death and rebirth into eternal consciousness. Shamans and prophets in the South Pacific, Indonesia, Central Asia, the Americas, Siberia, as well as ancient Egypt, have claimed transformation into birds. Aztec

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priests wore ceremonial robes made entirely of hummingbird feathers. Voodoo mam'bo use the carcasses of hummingbirds to entice the presence of the mystère Simbi, the mercurial, aerial loa who conducts the souls of the dead past the crossroads of eternity. Yogis say ecstatic soul-flight is the first magical power to be developed on the path of deathlessness.

Laurel turns on the radio exactly at four in the morning. Is there any news of a young woman's attempted suicide, is she stable, critical, DOA? But the late-breaking news is the usual thing: soldiers are invading a mud hut village somewhere; a multimillionaire actress is divorcing her gigolo husband amid much scandal; the mayor of a local municipality is caught with his hand in the public cookie jar. No one gives a fuck about a seventeen-year-old girl disturbed enough to take her life or, for that matter, a forty-seven-year-old stockbroker breaking the heart of a brown-eyed homecare nurse who loved him for fifteen years.

How can anyone care? Death is everywhere: smashed animals on the freeway, rain forests crashing down, mothers crushed beneath collapsed freeways, young men gunned down for a rock of crack or a political philosophy.

The living should care; the young should attend to the old; families should look beyond insular cares to the community; political activists should pause from self-righteous panoramas to see their own beloveds.

Oh hell, *should*. Laurel does not care, either. No, she really doesn't, and why *should* she? She is not among the living. The cares of the world do not concern her. She cannot protest or even remark upon the death in everyday existence. She is a yin to the yang of life. Denial, anger, bitterness, resignation; even this evolution of emotions presents itself as life-bound categories that make no sense anymore. She can feel how she is inexorably slipping into the dark.

And it's okay. Yes. Her concerns have shifted: To the life in death. The flip-side. The metaphysical balance: If death pervades life, then surely life must permeate death. Surely; beyond her fear, her horror, beyond her comprehension.

She turns off the radio, plays the book oracle, and contemplates images of birds in the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

When the questing Isis discovered her dead husband Osiris at last, he who in ceremony symbolizes all the Dead, she hovered over his body in the form of a bird, sending forth the light of everlasting life from the sheen of her feathers.

The floating woman, her eyes rimmed in blue and black; there were arcs of shimmering color sprouting from her arms and shoulders. In the moment split between dreams and wakefulness the woman was, Laurel recalls, comforting, like a blanket or firelight, heat reaching into her cold, sick bones.

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But that was right before the sudden pain, the metastasis. What does your comfort signify, Lady Isis?

Most charming of the avian hieroglyphs in the Egyptian Book of the Dead is the *ba*: depiction of the human soul as a delicate, human-headed bird. Plate Twenty-three of the book reads: Opened is the way of the souls (a tiny, human-headed bird), and my soul (the tiny bird again) does see it.

Chapter Nineteen is entirely devoted to the free, unfettered flying of, and feeding of nectar to, the *ba*. The *ba* has a corporeal, yet ethereal, existence. It converses with the gods and goddesses even while the humble earthly body still exists and is charged with taking the soul to the otherworld when the body dies. The *ba* is depicted as a territorial, inquisitive, hungry, sometimes belligerent, always frenetic being with a luminous presence and bright beating wings.

Dawn comes with a spectacular show of rose and gold. The eucalyptus and weeping willow sway and rustle, and Laurel wakes to their ancient presence, their sturdiness, their mute witness.

A sharp pain came again in the night. She took morphine, but Dolly Dagger does less and less for her. How can she explain what this pain is like? After the visceral torment, a disengagement. This is the personal grief at last, she knows; the final irrevocable coming apart of the vessel that once was the only carrier of her consciousness. However crappy it may have been, this body is all she knows. Of all goodbyes, this is the last.

Laurel goes to the bathroom. Another morphine shot in this awful skinny arm of hers. She washes her face. She combs what is left of her hair, wraps a purple silk scarf around her skull like a turban. Next makeup; thick, black eyeliner, dusty rose blush over too-prominent cheekbones; scarlet gloss smeared liberally on withered lips, make them flower-kissers.

Laurel, she tells herself, you look outtasight, baby.

She goes out to the living room, to the coffee table, and straightens the death books littered there. But her hand strays again to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the elegant hieroglyphs, the weird imagery.

Close eyes, flip the heft of paperbound wisdom, index finger seeking prophecy. And here: Chapter Nine, Plate Eighteen, at random and for the first time, the editor's preface and notation:

> The title of these works as a whole is a misnomer. In fact, if one must call this compilation of scrolls by a single name, one should refer to the title of this particular plate: *The Book of Coming Forth Into Day To Live After Death.*

Ah; and she smiles despite everything. *Not* a book of the Dead. A weird

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sensation rises up in her like a gulp of air turned inside out. Coming Forth Into Day: a book of Life! A book of instruction!

All the beautiful girls on Haight-Ashbury twenty years ago claimed to be Egyptian princesses in a previous lifetime. How she remembers their sandal wood incense and their sloe-eyes and their young breasts naked under Egyptian cotton. But Laurel knows better now. Who would want to return to this world of shadows after coming forth into day?

She takes her sketchpad, the pastels, her cigarettes, the last of the good cabernet out on her deck. She slides the glass door shut behind her and sits. The little pale green plastic flying saucer with the bright red plastic flower decals sways gently in the Pacific breeze.

She doesn't wait long before her dependable Allen's hummer comes. What a hungry guy he is, visiting her morning 'til night. Wouldn't she love a guy like that, couldn't stay away from her all day long?

Then a Calliope comes, candy-cane striped gorget, gleaming gold-green back, cinnamon belly. A Calliope, she's never seen a Calliope before!

And a Costa's, with his violet-purple crown and his dark leaf-green feathers, and a Lucifer, with his violet-red gorget and his distinctive forked emerald tail.

The air all around her is filled with flitting, winged jewels.

Her lazy little black-chinned hummer perches and sips for a while, but then a tiny, tinny belligerent *chup-chup-chup!* pierces the morning blaze, and the black-chin and the Lucifer spiral away.

She sees a magnificent hummer.

Hovering over her. A tiny, exquisite golden body, levitating on gleaming fans of silver and vermilion and chrysolite, chupping excitedly. And looking down at her, a pale, round, flat face. A sad and lovely face.

Of course she knows that face, has rendered it in countless self-portraits, idealized it, corrupted it, broken it into planes and angles, rendered it fantastic with electric-blue tears sliding from the eyes. She's always been proud of the eyes. Not so proud of the mouth that has uttered meanness and nasty words, but she cannot do anything about that now.

The hummer darts away.

There is a sort of *click*, a huge compression in her chest, and she screams, the pain is terrifying, and she screams again, eyes wide open, every nerve snapping, and then she swoons.

There is a clanging noise that almost disturbs her from the task at hand. Go away, go away. If that's Jerry banging at her front door, he'll have to let himself in.

She looks down and sees the body crumpled there, so much baggage that must be left behind. The grief passes quickly now.

She soars up into the turquoise sky. The sun is dazzling. Bright beating wings take her. ●

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art: Will Brown

The author's latest tale is a fantasy that takes a hard look at the power of

WORDS

by Tony Daniel

Ah, Francisco, so you're the one they sent. Stay . . . stay your hand a moment. You will do the job fast and with mercy, your eyes say. Your eyes are so hard, Francisco. Sit down and have a drink. A last drink between old friends, eh? Celia! A tankard of—what? Ale? No, Francisco. You're a grave man, a weighty man who takes dark and brooding beer. Stout, Celia! Two of them.

Welcome, sir. Welcome to my demesne, my holdings, the sinecure of my old age. Lady Bennett of the *Wandering Werewolf*. Well, I'm not really a lady. Celia! Quick with those beers. Celia is a fine girl, oh yes. I'd have had her in the old days, Francisco. She'd have jumped to my voice, I promise you, longed for me to touch her maiden cheek—but that time has passed. I have become a bitter woman, my old friend. Arkady is gone, and my words are so weak and dull. I could not even charm you into my bed, though I know you love me still. You are a fool, Francisco.

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See? No power in my words but a certain wrinkled sadness hanging in the air. I am a waste, a pauper, an empty flask.

This is where I met Arkady first, here in this pub, at this very table. Did you know that? I was here with the little Duchess Maria. Don't look so taken aback, my friend. I am enamored of the nobility. They leave a wonderful taste in the mouth, so full of themselves, like ripe peaches aching to burst. So sweet to sip slowly, in a dark and fragrant room with the windows shut tight. And Maria Boudenair was the sweetest of all. She washed her skin with buttermilk each morning. Her hair was as fine and jet black as gentle rain at midnight. And her breasts, Francisco! Ah, and her little clenched fists. I spent hours kissing them open—then she would sometimes scratch. She was perfect, I tell you. I desired her utterly and took her with utter bliss.

Then one night Arkady came and sat at our table. He entered with a gaggle of those sycophants who always follow about the more powerful poets. He couldn't have gotten rid of them if he tried, and so he tolerated them, perhaps pitied and loved them. Did I become one of those persons, Francisco? No. I was special to Arkady. I was his friend.

There was never a question of physical love, you see. My words would never have had any power over him, even if I had tried to work a spell. His very laughter could turn them to dust before my face. I'd seen him do it to others without thinking. There was never a poet like Arkady. There may never be again. And it was Maria he had eyes for, of course. From the beginning. But he noticed me, Francisco! I was not an annoyance to be dismissed.

I flashed him cat-evil eyes when he came to sit with us, but this only amused him the more. He motioned his retinue to go to the bar and await him there.

"I've heard your sword work is a dance to the war gods," he said to me. "I have heard the King's Guard captain is jealous of your beauty and grace, and will no longer let you dance upon the field."

"My victims don't think of me as an artist," I said. "They simply die—in fear and bewilderment. But I did fall into a sort of trouble with the Guard."

"And have you killed as many as you have bedded?" He sat down across from us. Maria gave a little duchess huff of irritation and annoyance.

"I try to keep both sides of the record sheet balanced," I said.

I was intrigued and titillated by his voice, his manner. I assure you I take all the precautions, Francisco. I have amulets and talismans which can unwind any knot of words cast to imprison me. Was his power so great that he overcame all my wardings? Or did my interest and, later, my love, come from only myself? I suppose I shall never know. Ah, but

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I do, Francisco. My heart tells me it was my own when I gave it to Arkady.

"There have been threats upon my life," said Arkady. "Powerful people want me dead, I've heard tell, and I am in need of a sword beside me. A sword that will take on all suitors asking for the next dance."

"How much?"

"Two hundred a day, plus expenses."

"And who are you?"

"Just a wandering poet, my good woman."

He spoke the truth, Francisco. A wandering poet, whose words ran from the primal tap. Beer from the gods, I tell you. And how Maria drank him in, grew drunk on him that night. He was a child; he'd no idea what he was doing to her. I had, of course, nullified all her wardings with that art you know so well, old friend. She was a tree on a mountain top, and he was lightning—blind, white-hot. She was burning in no time.

But I did not care. Here was a thing, a man, a human, that I had never known before. Not even you, Francisco, with your too-feeling face and hard, sunlight eyes, come near. But you are, perhaps, as close as any other man has ever come. What is dogged loyalty in you was absolute, inviolable innocence in Arkady. It is like a campfire and the sun. Oh, don't look at me like that, old friend. At least you have a spark. The rest of us stumble in the dark; we are so dissipated, so weary of the world. For Arkady, the world was constantly new, and I felt it—when I was with him.

So I guarded him. There was no real need. He was no mercenary versifier. He existed in a web of context. Each word took on the power of the whole, and, with each new word, the power of the whole increased. The world warped itself to fit his conception of it. Sometimes you could see it changing, shimmering, bending, even as he spoke. And it was all so perfectly right after his passing, defined in relation to him as the moon's phases are created by the position of the sun.

Perhaps, for a while, he reshaped Maria. She'd never really had a youth, you know. Our betters are not born cynics and plotters, Francisco, but they are infected with the disease when they take their one ceremonial sip of mother's milk. I call it noble rot. Sauterne gone bad, they are: sickly sweet and deadly. But Maria was made whole and good, for at least a space in time. Most of us are not even given that. And this a girl who used suddenly to bite my nipples for no apparent reason.

She was kind even to me. I accompanied them on their walks. She became Arkady's patron, or I should say, he chose to accept her loving offering. All he wanted was a bit of bread and wine and a garden to take his morning walks in. He made specific spells for the household, some-

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thing he claimed never to have done before. So even the servants loved him.

And we were happy, the three of us. Maria brought us flowers, showed us her drawings. And I guarded over them when they made love in the arbor. Maria's husband even took up with me for a while, his old bones awakened by all the healing and power in his house.

Boudenair and I were lying in his bed when he told me of the King's plans for Arkady. I had, I believe, brought some vigor back to the old man myself. He began to take a more active interest in Court doings. So he heard, second hand, but from several sources, the royal will. Never before had a poet come into his power so quickly, so young. Imminently malleable, corruptable. Arkady was to be the King's new laureate—after the proper grooming, of course. With such a poet, the King would be invincible in war, in . . . everything.

So, of course, Arkady was doomed to die. Who was the instigator? Our current Lord Laureate Sherigan? The noble opposition? It hardly matters. I knew what was coming and tried to be perpetually vigilant. I am, you know, Francisco, the very best at what I engage in, whether it is love or war.

I noticed the warding amulet on Maria soon afterward. It was subtle, worked into a brooch so cleverly that only a trained eye could possibly see it. Her women dressed her each morning, after her bath, so I could in no way be sure she knew she had it on. And she seemed so in love, still so in love. Her love worked a kind of spell on me, I'm afraid. So startled and fascinated was I by the flash and sound of it, that I didn't realize when it had passed, when the old Maria was back.

Oh Francisco, is love just a word? Just a knotting of forces in empty air. Must love always pass away? Arkady loved Maria. Is it just a carved saying in tree bark—that the tree grows over, that falls to old time's ax along with the tree? Arkady loved Maria. I loved Arkady. There, I have said it. Still he is gone, and I am alone. The wind blows hard and strong sometimes, but all it is, really, is a difference in temperature working itself out. Love.

So she took her little knife to him in the arbor, the one place I could not follow, was not welcome. I heard his cry of surprise and came running, sword drawn, cursing myself for somehow letting an assassin into the garden.

The little dagger burst into a deep blue flower in her hand—the blue of Arkady's bewilderment and pain. That is why I do not think it was old laureate Sherigan who put her up to it. He would have known the power of Arkady's naked words. Maria flung the knife-flower aside and pulled a small dart shooter from her dress folds. So young she was. So inexperienced. Arkady looked at her in complete sadness.

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"Maria. My Maria," he said.

The dart shooter melted into a deep brown syrup, the very color of lost love.

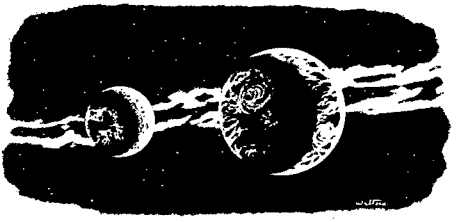
I have told you he was pure, Francisco. Arkady wore no self-protection amulet. Can you believe it? A simple poet's precaution against his own unruly emotions. Of course you can believe it. He was Arkady. Arkady Wine-word, Gentle-tongue, who loved so simply and completely that to lose that love was to die. He simply ceased to exist. But he left a whisper behind, a gentle breeze through the arbor's branches. "Maria."

So I killed her. Quickly. But I looked her in the eyes when I did it.

What would you have me do now? I have slain a duchess of the realm, yes. I am good with a blade, but I am no noble. And what is my crime? I am guilty of love? Please don't think me so simple. Just because there is a word does not mean there is any such thing. There is nothing so soft in the world. Don't you agree, Francisco? The world is made only of hard things, with sharp edges—like your eyes, your cold, glassy eyes, Francisco. Except for human flesh, don't you think so. Human flesh is limp and weak.

But not me, Francisco. I am brittle, hard and empty, like a battle-dance. You are spilling out all that good dark beer, old friend. Your eyes betray you. You are not so hard after all. My sword slides nicely about in your belly. Did they really think our old love would mean anything to me? How sentimental. Ah, Francisco.

To think, I almost believed such a thing myself. ●



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Sis,

I'm really sorry Tony and I missed seeing you and Herbert. Where is Herbert now? We're in Nepal now. We didn't pull a house in the embassy complex, so we're stuck out in the boonies. We're in a tiny village-cum-suburb on the banks of the Baghmati, a cold swiftly flowing mountain river often clouded by corpse ashes or even the occasional corpse bobbing by. The local markets feature unrefrigerated fly-covered mahseer, the tasty Baghmati trout. God, I hate it here. The flight to Calcutta was terrible. The AC went out and the air grew stagnant. Maggie and Ben both lost their suppers, mainly on me. We got in to Calcutta about five A.M. Nobody knew anything about the flight to Kathmandu. The name of the airport—I'm not kidding—is Dum Dum International. All these Indians ran up and began carrying or trying to carry our luggage everywhere. A couple of cases walked away for good. We found our pilot asleep in Dum Dum International. He looked at us and said we could only take three bags and the kids or all the bags and no kids. He would bring it all later. "They are bery high mountains." He said a friend of his would watch the baggage. We got on his prop plane and taxied down the runway and something fell *off* the plane. So we taxied back. "It's an unexpected delay. They happen all the time." They wouldn't let us into the central building—where the food and restrooms are—because our papers said we were going to Nepal. So we had to sneak behind planes on the runway to relieve ourselves. We got to leave about 10:30, and it was already 107 degrees. The plane seemed to barely make it over the Himalayas when we crossed into Nepal. Embassy officials helped us skip customs. They were all really nice, preparing us for this crappy house. Our long tall house has a long stairs to get to it and a spiral staircase connecting the inside. The first two floors are kitchen and living room and three and four are bedrooms. The stairs are marble, everything else is concrete. Not at all suitable for a two-year-old. The second floor has electricity, which goes out for a few hours every day. The concrete is neither painted nor carpeted. We've got a crew putting in more wiring and they will paint it all Nepali style in a few months. We're forbidden by law to do anything to the house ourselves.

The wiring crew works this way. At eight, fourteen men let themselves in. The ten Ghurkas are the wiremen. Three of them begin chipping through the concrete with chisels and mallets while the other seven watch. The four Tibetan refugees go to one of the bedrooms and begin making outlet boxes *by hand*, utilizing the pieces of wood they picked up on the way. About eleven they eat their lunch—hot tea (one of the watchers is in charge of this) buttered and salted, and wheat paste. Then

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they take a nap until two. If Maggie cries and wakes them, they complain. Then they work till 4:30 and split.

I figured food would be cheap. It's *high*. Lettuce is $7 a head! That's Seven, not One! Liquor is dirt cheap and drugs are super-available. Ben already has had some kind of organism get to him, and he's on medicine. We're waiting for our household goods shipment. It's (maybe) sitting in Dum Dum airport, where yesterday it was 120 degrees! If the cans don't explode because of the heat, the unpressurized plane ride to Kathmandu will get them. *If* somebody thinks to load them.

It's a real adventure here. The phones are a joke. Nepalese call up and say, "Hello Hello Hello Hello." They'll just say "Hello" for ten minutes. Some will say "Okay, Okay." In addition, you hear at least two other loud conversations at the same time. Everything's tapped. Crude stuff—you can hear it click on. Our guards outside are "protecting" us—if anyone threatened those guys, they would run away! I should've never left civilization.

There's hot water at the embassy. Every three days, the kids and I ride into town so we can take showers. The taxis rip us off for five bucks each way. In three months, we'll probably get a water heater—it'll be winter then and it gets damn cold with the wind off the roof of the world. In nine months we'll have R 'n' R, hopefully in Hawaii—maybe we'll come to Austin. Won't that be bluebonnet season?—No, it'll be May. We could go to all the caverns—Inner Space, Longhorn, World of Wonder. We could do *something*.

Tony loves it here. Of course, *he* has something to do. Mainly getting old American hippies out of jail. I wish I had TV or radio or my books or records or *anything*. Nepal keeps the Red Chinese out of India and funnels refugees from Tibet out into the world. There are a surprising number of Afghans here—well, I guess not too surprising, since there's over five million Afghan refugees. Half the refugees in the world are Afghans. It's a nervous time. The Soviets are leaving Afghanistan. The Kabul government is bombing Mujahedeen camps in Pakistan. Some of the planes may come from the U.S.S.R. Red Guards (Chinese) are always driving around Kathmandu. And of course, trade in drugs and arms. In 717 days we could get to leave the country. Pray for us.

Down the street is a big temple to Brahma. That's unusual, because the creator doesn't get much airplay in Hinduism. They've got all the statues in front of the temple out into the street. Prominent among these are two plaster of paris jobs from the States. A monkey sitting on a pile of books—one of them conspicuously marked "Darwin"—in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker" considering a human skull. I considered Aunt Ira's version of this to be the last word in trailer park culture. They've also got statues of Yetis, tapirs, skinks, blind snakes, salamanders, and

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axolotl. The golden-skinned version of the latter is held particularly sacred. Hundreds of them creep around the neighborhood, occasionally throwing themselves in the river or the local sewers, which are all open. I've been cautioned against killing them, but I drive them out with my broom every chance I get.

Well this is Nepal. A beautiful country. I wish you were all here. Give my love to the family.

Sarah

August 23

Dear Sis,

You have no idea how much your last letter meant to me. It's my First Contact with the outside world. I re-read it every day, tasting each word on my tongue. It smells bad today. The shellac plant is in operation. One of Nepal's resources is the sal tree, which grows in the southern hills. Sal furnishes feed for the lac insect, which deposits lac on the twigs. Lac is made into shellac and other varnishes. Shellac is mainly processed in Briatnagar, but they have this "secret" plant (secret except when the wind blows—Tony found out about this at the embassy—everybody here is close-mouthed—"What smell?") where they're trying to make plastics, fuel, or pharmaceuticals. The secret plant is funded by the U.S., the U.S.S.R., New Zealand, and Sandoz Corp. money. Shellac is not a major industry. Major industries are tourism, jute production, and sugar. Nepal's very progressive. Polygamy, child marriage, and the caste system were abolished in 1963. Polyandry is still practiced in the hills, but no one talks about that. I know too much about this wretched kingdom.

Since Zia's plane exploded, Tony's been real busy at the embassy. We all gave to a collection to buy water purification tablets for Bangladesh. The annual flood is much worse there this year. We may have to take in an American family from Pakistan for a week or two if the situation there gets worse. Ditto for Burma. Jesus. I'd steal everything they have and sell them to a white slave ring. Morale here is low. I'd like to hang Colin Stith. He talked Tony into this. Another woman and I intend to sabotage his water when he comes here. He'll be TDY, living in the compound, the sorry bastard. Only little hopes like this keep me alive. I had to chase two of those damned golden salamanders out of our bathroom this morning. The crowd at the Brahma temple looked on in horror as I swept them onto the stairs. I may pay them a visit out of boredom. They don't even have regular church services at the embassy. We got our extra luggage after only fourteen days. Only three cases gone. I'm

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told that's better than average. We *really* use that stuff. We've been waiting for our household goods shipment. Well it arrived yesterday. It had come into Calcutta a *month* before. The crates sat out in the rain for a *month* before they told the Nepali pilot. He re-crated the stuff because the former crates had rotted. Everything got here wet. Rectangular cubes of mildew—you couldn't separate the former crates from the clothes, from the mold. Stereo, TV covered in mildew, my new blue suit had disintegrated and run into the VCR and become a slab of mildew. Some of the boxes were missing—stolen—but that didn't matter, since everything here is ruined. We don't know if there's any way to get any $ for this. Nobody here gives a damn. One secretary—*she* gets to live in the embassy compound—sent over a dish. Ground camel casserole (I'm *not* kidding). One. Damn them all. I miss my soaps. If the VCR had made it, you could have sent me "The Young and the Restless" and that one at two o'clock with Vicky Lord. If I get one, would you send them? Please, I'll reimburse you. God, I was a biochemistry major, and now I long for "The Young and the Restless"!

The kids—the Americans, Brits, Kiwis, etc.—are *wild*. It's completely acceptable to give them beer and wine at parties, and all the kids *do* is party. That's all the adults do—those who aren't stuck out in the boonies like us, but they don't include the kids. Even at the embassy, the kids are off in a different world. This summer, an American woman, Mary Margaret Godwin—I think that's her name—ran across the Himalayas. She and her dog. She coped with diabetes and a broken foot and the Indian government. The Indians were glad to open the eastern Nepal border for her to enter, but refused to open the western for her to leave so she had to make a two thousand mile detour to return to her original point of departure.

She talked to some reporters about the machine-gun escort the Indian government gave her to make sure she'd be safe in Darjeeling. The Indian government doesn't talk about trouble there (Darjeeling), only the warm war in Kashmir between India, China, and Pakistan. They prefer people to praise Darjeeling as a tourist attraction (!) with its ancient terraces and centuries-old tea bushes. Tony keeps holding this woman up as an example of American fortitude. I hate her.

This is not my second letter to you. It's my tenth. Tony finds them and shreds them. He keeps saying I'll adapt. He's my only source of news and he's tired of telling me about alerts. I'm going to hide this now, because he's due home in a couple of hours and I've got to clean up. More tomorrow.

Hi. I can post this today because the kids and I are going to the embassy for a shower today. It's Thursday, August 25. I found out about the Brahma temple. They offer some sort of rejuvenation treatment. That's why they're so popular. It's probably hogwash. Mountain herbs, musk,

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or maybe shellac plant by-products. They have singing and drama there on Fridays. I'm going. I'm telling Tony that the kids and I are turning Hindu. Maybe that will scare him enough to get us out of here.

If Herbert gets a chance to sell his radar system to India, tell him to come up here. God it would be nice to hear a Texas accent again. How are you doing? Still active in that holy roller church? (Only kidding.) One of those damned golden salamanders is watching me. Maybe I'll buy a mongoose in town today to keep 'em out. Bite their little gold heads off.

Namsté

Sarah

Sept. 7

Dear Sis,

Because of the trouble in Rangoon, Tony's been on continual alert for a week. That means he stays at the embassy night and day. He's basically a filter. Our monolithic government, believe it or not, can monitor every phenomenon on the planet. Births, deaths, politics, who's in what church, who's been naughty, who's been nice. With all that information Washington would white-out. Tony's job—during alerts—is to screen the visuals down to an almost recognizable blur, cut the sound down to a nearly comprehensible scream. I wonder sometimes if there might be subliminal embeds—like naked women reflected on whiskey bottles in magazine ads—if there might be embeds in all that data. Hidden messages from beyond. Control messages.

It's just as well Tony's at the embassy—he'd never be able to deal with what's happening to me now. I went to the Brahma temple last Friday. First there was a big dance outside among the statues. We all danced—even Ben and Maggie. Then we went inside, where it stank from the ghee lamps and the incense. The incense makes your heart beat heavier, as though it turns your blood to mercury. We sat in a tiny room surrounded by a lattice. Shadowy figures (in furs?) watched through the lattice. One of the priests, who speaks English, came and sat beside me and translated the service. During gaps, he gossiped. The last American visitor was Audrey Gartner. She was the wife of the guy before the guy Tony replaced. She was the one who disappeared. Really reassuring. The officiating priest began a long Sanskirt hymn to Agni, god of fire, who is always invoked first. Then there was a hymn to Soma. "My" priest told me that they had hopes that the local shellac cracking station would be able to duplicate the ancient Vedic beverage. The plant had already

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helped them. I started to ask how, but the officiating priest began a hymn to Brahma. I began to think of the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal, which killed so many people in a toxic cloud. Not unlike the Doomsday Clouds described in the *Mahabharta*. The officiating priest then began a story in Nepali. It was the story of Creation. "My" priest translated. "In the beginning, Brahma made the man in a dream and the gods caused Brahma to enter his dream and become the man. The man had a thousand heads and a thousand arms and a thousand eyes and a thousand ears and he covered all the earth and penetrated within for the space of ten fingers' breadth and all the air. He pervaded all the animals and plants, the eaters of food and those who are eaten. And all the earth and the seas and the airs were but one quarter of him. Three quarters of him was in deep space and these became the stars and moon and sun and gods and nagas and demons. The gods approached the man, for they were hungry for sacrifice. And they pulled things from the man. They pulled a bird from the tree on which it grew and the man lost two eyes, two wings, and a mouth. They plucked the tree from the earth in which it grew and the man lost a limb. Soon the gods had pulled all things from the man except for two eyes, two ears, two arms, two feet, and a phallus. And the gods made each of the things they took sacred to them. And the man said, 'I am no longer Brahma for I have been dismembered. I will leave the face of the earth and turn my back on my brother gods.' And the man strode toward the yoni of the earth to enter within. And the gods were frightened that there would be no man to tend the sacrificial fires. So the gods sent Maya, the demon of illusion, to tempt the man. And she appeared as a beautiful nymph and stirred him up. And he had intercourse with her, but she drew away at the moment of ejaculation. The man's seed fell upon the yoni of the earth and from it sprang the four kinds of men. And the man said to them, 'I am no longer a god on this earth, but your father. As your father, I cannot help you on this earth. I am called Yama and I will make a place for you to go when you die. But remember, my sons, I was once called Brahma and if you gather the things that were mine and return them to me, we will be one again, one great soul and we will inhale all the gods who dismembered me.' Then he filled the minds of the priests with the words, the verses, and the formulas which reveal the laws (dharmas) of the universes. Then he entered into the yoni of the earth." Now we came to the climax of the service. Those who wanted rejuvenation, to move toward Brahma instead of along the weary arrow of time, should come forward. Two very old women went forward. They appeared afraid. "My" priest told me there was nothing to worry about. They were showing respect for the divine. Perhaps I too wanted to move toward youth? What the hell. I went forward. The old women stepped back so I might receive the treatment.

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I was scared, but I was too ashamed to run away. The officiating priest brought forth an urn. He motioned me to stick my left arm inside. I did. Something bit me. I ran out of the temple. I figured it was a cobra. I called the medicos. They asked me how big the bite was. Too small for a cobra, and besides, cobra bites are rarely fatal. The figure for cobra bites is way too high—most men who kill their wives say that the wives were bitten by a cobra. Local law lets them burn cobra victims quickly—cobra venom is believed to speed the corpse's deterioration. They said it was probably a spider. I should put ice on it—I sent Ben to the market for ice—keep the wound clean, and take some of the antibiotics they prescribed for Ben a fortnight ago. Did I want them to tell my husband? God, no. Tony would die—just die—if he thought I'd brought any embarrassment to the Embassy. Tony was gone during the weekend. My left arm began to swell up on Saturday and I was achey all over like the flu. God, I dreaded those steps. I was real mean to the kids—bordering on abuse. Sunday, I began to peel like a sunburn victim. Monday, I felt so bad I didn't even leave bed. Literally, the kids had to forage for themselves. Tuesday, I didn't hurt anymore, but I was weak as a kitten. Someone from the temple sent a basket of goodies. Yesterday, I looked in the mirror. IT WORKED. My gray hairs were gone, my tits passed the pencil test, no more stretch marks. I can't remember when I've been so happy! I cleaned up the kids and we went sightseeing for the first time. Did you know that Kathmandu has a pizzeria? For the American and French tourists? Good pizza, deep-dish Chicago style. I feel that I've passed through hell and come out on the other side. I can't wait for Tony to see me. We haven't been intimate since I had Maggie. Neither of us really wanted to. But now! Don't tell anyone about this. Anyone. We've got to tell the State Department first. Research will have to be very careful—not to destroy this wonder until it's been analyzed. I feel very energetic, which explains the length of this letter. Most snake venom breaks down proteins. I figure the bite introduced a toxin that broke enough "old" proteins to stimulate messenger-RNA to create new (original pattern) protein. I've been reading a lot, too—the British Embassy has a library.

Well, how are you? I can't believe that guy Karl threw you out of church. Maybe you can sue him. Don't tell Herbert about this—let him come up here on one of his Asian jaunts. By that time I'll have talked with the State Department. Maybe I can send a sample of the stuff to you.

Love,

Sarah

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Sis,

Everything has gone bad. Well, that's a good enough opening, I guess. I've thrown away every other start and I'm running out of paper. I'll address the envelope now while I'm still in my right mind. If you get this, it means Ben was able to mail it to you on the sly.

Tony came home on the 7th. Some busybody had called him and said I was mistreating the kids. I had everything cleaned up by then and the kids were having a great time. Who wouldn't with a younger, more energetic mom? Tony went white when he first saw me. At first I thought he was mad, then I realized he was scared. I tried to act casual, which was pretty dumb, since my apparent age has changed from thirty-six to about eighteen. He didn't buy the make-over story (I'd never seen him like this, but then he'd never seen me like *this*; after all, we didn't meet until after college). He waited until the kids were asleep. They sleep in the bedroom on the third floor across from ours. We've been salvaging the junk from our household goods shipment in one of the fourth-floor bedrooms. He suggested (all sweetness and smiles) that we go work on that a while. I guess he thought the Russians had done it to me. I went into the bedroom and he locked it behind me. Which is why the paper is mold-spotted. Sorry.

I told him everything, but he didn't believe me. He asked me lots of questions to make sure that I was I. What was the make of our first car? What was our mother's maiden name? What kind of beer did his dad drink? What was President Reagan's middle name? What floor of what hotel did we spend our honeymoon at?

Each correct answer made him a little more desperate. I told him if he wasn't sure, he could take me to the embassy and let their doctors examine me. He told me the embassy was the last place he wanted me to go. He would just keep me here until he was sure. Sure of *what,* I asked? He didn't say.

The next day he dismissed the electrical workers. I thought about screaming that I was a prisoner, but given the local idea of what a good husband's power over his wife is, I knew it would be a waste of time. I got pretty hungry and thirsty during the day. The kids stood outside the door and talked to me. Tony had of course taken the keys. I told Ben he was a brave boy for taking care of his sister.

When Tony came home, I could smell food—the cold curried veggies you buy from the stand down the street. He opened the door and I went to kiss him, and he zapped me with a cattle prod. He was crying as he did so, if that's any consideration. He told me to get in the far corner. He brought two huge plates of veggies, a big earthenware jug of water, two empty coffee cans (for my wastes), and worse, the kids. They were

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crying. Tony had told them I was real sick. He said they could visit with me for half an hour. He warned me "not to try and take them hostage" and gestured meaningfully with his prod. I scooped the veggies up with both hands and ate like an animal. This scared the kids too. Maggie stayed by the door and wouldn't look at me. I haven't seen her since. My warder came and took the kids away. I didn't say anything to him. I hoped I could shame him out of this crazy behavior.

That night I got all achey again. It was worse than the first time, since I had no aspirin or soft bed. I threw up a lot of the veggies. My skin was cracked the next morning. I hollered through the door, asking him to take me to a doctor. He told the kids they couldn't come upstairs. I rooted through the mess and found a copy of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* that didn't smell too bad and was more-or-less readable. This helped me pass the time. I wish I had some of his biochemistry books to check some things. I had filled both my waste cans and emptied the water jug by the time Tony returned. I wanted to dump both of them on him, but I knew he could close the door and never come back.

The peeling was pretty advanced when he brought me the food. "I don't think the kids should see you like this." "So you think I'm Sarah now." "I don't know *what* you are." I could smell whiskey on his breath. He looked bad. Bags under his eyes—a tremble in the hand that held the prod. I wonder if that's a standard embassy issue?

I hurt too bad to sleep. I guessed that I would go pre-pubescent with the next change. I doubt I could get any smaller, because I couldn't conceive a mechanism for altering the bone structure. I wondered if primary and secondary sexual characteristics would vanish during this catabolic phase, or if they would simply cease to be supported by hormones. Mainly I wondered if this would be the last change.

I watched Tony leave through my small window. Across the cobblestone path, the officiating priest was watching me. He looked very sad. I intuited that the temple takes care of people in regression. I looked for another book and found a pocket mirror. A fine brown-red down had begun to grown on my face and arms, and my forehead had begun to recede. I was beginning to look like one of the yeti statues in front of the Brahma temple.

To overcome panic, I spent the day working out a model of what's happening. I decided my original model of a generalized protein-attacking enzyme was far too crude. The substance regulating the change had to *itself* be changing into a series of different enzymes, each of which catalyzes a specific protein. This selectivity has analogues with viral activity, but is clearly more advanced. As organisms evolved, they developed more and more proteins. E. coli has 2500 ± 500 proteins. Higher mammals such as man have over a million. The temple-enzyme may

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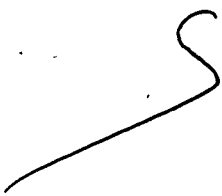
catalyze one protein at a time, and, using the energy created by the reaction, change itself into the enzyme specific for the next protein. This makes it sound like it's intelligent and purposeful, but we do similar things just to turn food into energy. This explains the age reversal, also. As we grow older, we develop more proteins—that's why genetic material changes in older women, why older women are more likely to give birth to monster babies. Of course, pesticides and other pollutants accelerate this process, but what's happening to me is finer than a protein fuck-up like cancer. Maybe the enzyme *didn't* come from a bite. Maybe it was a hypodermic. "The shellac plant has already helped us." Tony was wrong. I'm not adapting. I'm reversing millions of years of adaptation. When does it stop? This needn't be reverse evolution. My own system will constantly strive to complexify, constantly try to get back what it has lost. This motion toward homeostasis will keep me alive. It could create animals never before seen on this earth.

My mind still seems sharp. Perhaps this argues for a nonorganic component of self. I hope that this is the last change.

I spent all of that day with my model. I tried to hide behind the packing cases when Tony came with my food. He said he'd come in after me unless I showed myself. Ben was with him. Ben said, "Gorilla-mommy." I asked Tony to take Ben away, not to let him see me like this. Tony said it's important for Ben to know what his mommy did to herself. I said he could take me to the temple and they could take care of me. No one need think of me again.

Remember Babs remember me when I was human.

It's been a while since I wrote that. I'm all achey again. I am having trouble writing. I don't want to lose my hands. I have a dream that I pull a sapling out of the ground. A huge piece of flint is caught in the roots. I hit Tony with this club. I can get away from here. I haven't done anything bad. I don't want to be a golden salamander. Must remember to put letter in the envelope. The big lamp a club. Foodtime soon. If



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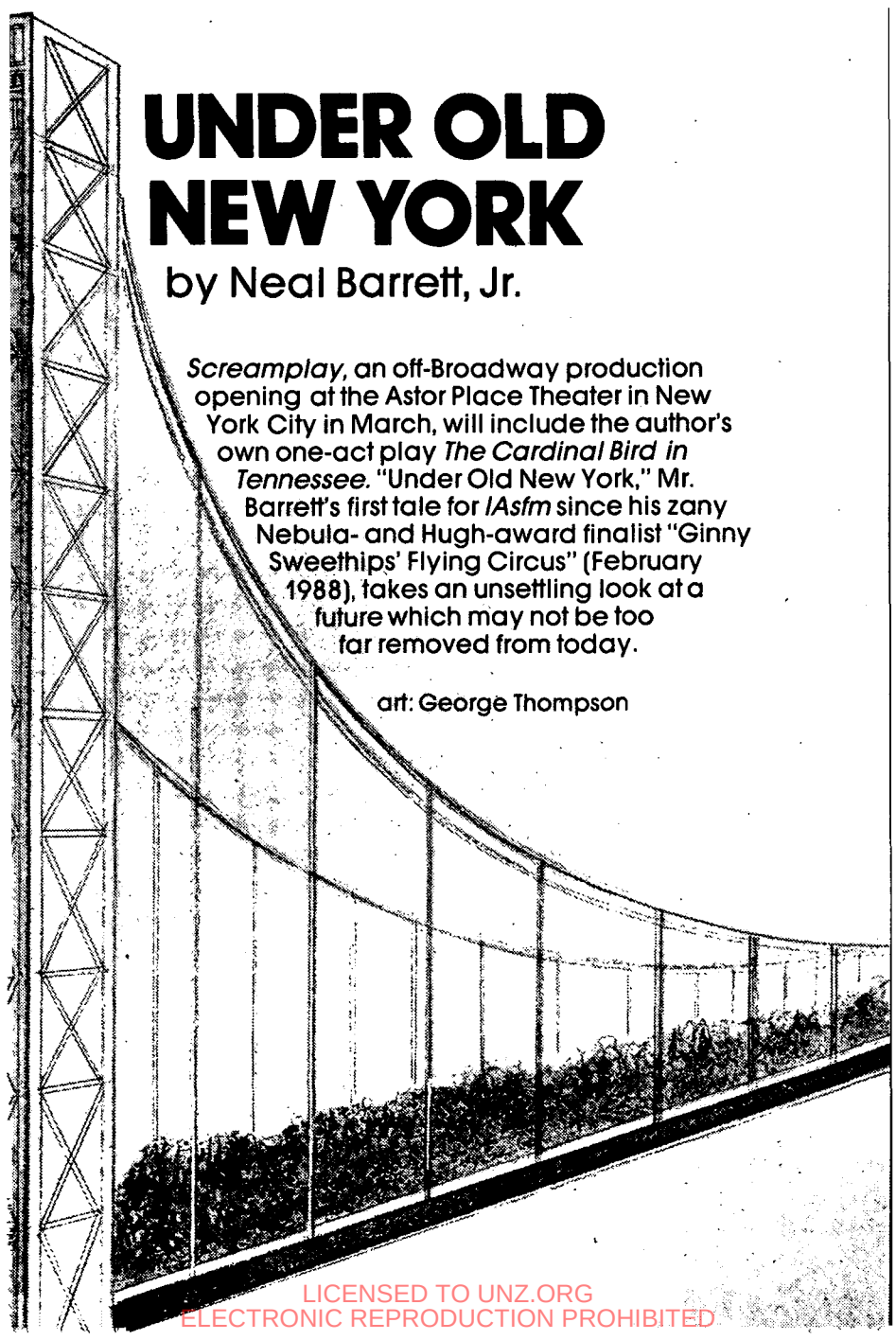
UNDER OLD NEW YORK

by Neal Barrett, Jr.

Screamplay, an off-Broadway production opening at the Astor Place Theater in New York City in March, will include the author's own one-act play *The Cardinal Bird in Tennessee.* "Under Old New York," Mr. Barrett's first tale for *IAsfm* since his zany Nebula- and Hugh-award finalist "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus" (February 1988), takes an unsettling look at a future which may not be too far removed from today.

art: George Thompson



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Stay in line and keep your goods hid, that's two things to do. That's what the kid said. No, he hadn't been up there himself but he knew a guy who had. He told her all this and she gave him half a roll. They sat and talked in a rusted-out car. He said he came from Tennessee. He said there wasn't any work down there and he didn't think he'd ever go back. He ate the roll without chewing it at all. Hannah couldn't spare the food. But she couldn't stand to eat while the boy sat and watched with hungry eyes. The boy had a pinched up Southern kind of look. He was skinny as a rail. He said his name was Cadillac. He liked it when she smiled at the name. This was clearly what he wanted her to do. His skin smelled bad, like soured up milk, like something was wasted inside.

The rain came hard in the night but the car was okay. Cadillac slept in the front. Hannah in the back. She listened to the rain. She stayed awake a long time. The boy was maybe fourteen, fifteen tops, but that was old enough. She slept with her food between her legs. She slept with an icepick in her hand. The rain let up toward morning but the sky was still low and hard as iron. When she woke the boy was gone.

This was after Newark when she found out she'd come the wrong way. The old filling station map said tunnels ran into New York. The man in the store had to laugh. He said they didn't anymore. He said the niggers had stopped them all up. He said the only way over was the bridge. He said he was about to close up and she could stay on for supper if she liked. He had a place above the store. Times were hard he knew that and he liked to help people when he could. The big coat fit her like a tent; she knew this didn't fool the man at all. He could see right through, he could see her in his head. The store was hot and smelled of mold. Hannah said no thanks, she had to go. Her brother who had done a lot of boxing in North Platte, Nebraska, was waiting down the street. Her brother knew right where she was and he didn't like to wait. She bought an apple and some rolls and sliced meat. The meat had gone bad. She spent the next day doubled up sick in a culvert by the road.

That night she found the rusted-out car and Cadillac. In the morning she ate her apple and a roll and started off again. There were plenty of people on the road. Most everyone was headed up north, but some were walking back the other way. Hannah kept to herself. She didn't talk to anyone. Cadillac had told her that, too. There are all kinds of folks out there, is what he said. You get in the line, you make friends with someone, they're going to find out what you got. What kind of food and how much. If you've got any money in your sack. You get all cozy then you get across the bridge, this friend tells a nigger what you said, something you didn't mean to say. What if I didn't say anything at all? Hannah said. Don't matter if you didn't or you did. They'll make something up and say that. There's only so many jobs over there, and folks will do anything they

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can to get work. This is what the guy told *him,* and he'd been across the bridge and back. He met a girl in line and she messed him up good. Ate all his food and then stole the job that should've been his. That's just the way it is.

Hannah figured Cadillac was right or close enough. Three weeks on the road, and she'd learned a whole lot by herself. They nearly had her in Decatur, Illinois. Migrants camped out in a field. She woke in time and got away. Not a one of them was over nine or ten, kids running in a pack. Pittsburgh was good. A lot of the plants were going full. Knock on any back door, and they'd most of them fix a plate of food. It wasn't bad everywhere. Some towns were doing okay. If people had work they'd treat you fine. They knew how it was to do without.

Around noon the rain started up again; not the hard and steady rain that had drummed her to sleep the night before, but a rain you couldn't see, like a cloud come to earth, a dirt-cold rain that you knew could settle in, just hang there heavy for a week until it soaked right through to the bone. Hannah drew her collar up high and pulled the woolen cap down about her ears. The rain formed a chill oily mist on her face. She licked her upper lip and tasted salt. Road dirt from West Virginia. Handout food from Indiana, wood smoke from Illinois. You stay in the shower till you're weak in the knees, till the walls begin to sweat. A million little drops sting hot against your skin. The room's full of steam and the bathroom cabinet's full of all the white towels in the world.

Lord God, Hannah thought, when could she remember doing that? She knew exactly where and when, and thrust the picture out of her head, tossed it as far as it would go.

Merchants from Newark had set up stands along the highway out of town, lean-tos and tents, makeshift counters and stands. The owners were delighted with the rain. It brought people in off the road. They huddled inside from the cold. The stalls were mostly family affairs. A husband and his wife. The man sold goods while the woman watched the customers like a hawk. Road people didn't have a lot to spend, but they all knew how to steal.

Cadillac had said buy before you get too far. Don't buy nothing on the bridge, it'll cost you an arm and a leg. Hannah looked at the pitiful display. The vegetables were wilted, the fruit was overripe. The sight made her feel helpless, helpless and angry and hungry all the same. She knew this was stuff the people couldn't sell in town. There were peaches, no bigger than limes, pulpy with the smell of sweet decay. Apples that had laid on the ground. Back home, her father had raised a few hogs, just to eat and not to sell. Hannah had taken out a bucket of scraps from

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the kitchen every day; every scrap in that bucket was fresher than the crap they had here.

She picked out some apples that didn't seem entirely brown. Two long loaves of hard bread. You could chew on bread and get it soft. The carrots went limp in her hand, but she bought some anyway. A bunch of green onions. One orange. She stayed away from meat. It added up to forty-eight cents, three times what everything was worth. Hannah counted out the coins she had left. Seventeen cents. Two pennies, a nickel and a dime. Not a lot, but she would have to make do. Cadillac said you could make two dollars a day in New York, three if you had any skills.

For some time, Hannah had sensed a presence nearby. She felt vaguely ill at ease, felt the touch of curious eyes. She didn't turn around. She put the things she'd bought in a string sack she kept beneath her coat. She closed her change tightly in her fist and edged her way toward the front of the stall. An old woman blocked her path. Hannah backed off. The aisle was too narrow and there was nowhere to go.

"Excuse me," Hannah said, and tried to squeeze herself by.

The old woman looked right at her, determined not to move, looked right at her with predatory eyes, black eyes circled by halos of loose discolored flesh, looked right at her like an owl looks at a shrew.

Hannah was annoyed, startled by the dark and foreign face, by the tiny blue lips, by the nose that was sharp enough to cut.

"Listen, I have to get by," Hannah said, "you have to move."

"My husban' is dead," the woman said. "This is no matter to me, I tell you that. I can get along. I don' fock with no one, okay?"

Hannah took a deep breath, squeezed and shoved and forced her way free. She hurried through the stall into the rain. The old woman followed on her heels. Hannah looked the other way.

"Hey, I don' like to be push, okay? Is easy to push an ol' lady. What do you care?"

"Well, you just refused to let me by," Hannah said.

"My husban' is dead. He is driving this trock he falls dead."

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

"What's it to you? You got your youth you got your looks. We live in one house thirty years. He says, I don' want to drive a trock no more. He says, I don' want to work for focking Japs. I say, what do you care? They pay so what do you care?"

Hannah thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her coat. Everyone walked hunched up against the rain. Everyone's head disappeared. The woman was short; she scarcely came up to Hannah's chest. She took three steps to Hannah's one.

"I wish I had a egg," the woman said. "Luis, he wouldn't eat a egg.

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Any way you fix it, he don't touch a egg. Those apples you got, they no good. They gonna spoil plenty fast."

"I guess they'll have to do," Hannah said.

"I'm Mrs. Ortega. You don't say your name."

"Hannah," Hannah said, and wished she'd said Mary or Phyllis Ann.

"I know a Hannah once. I think she's a Jew. I guess a Jew's okay."

"That's nice," Hannah said. She wasn't listening at all.

The people on the road seemed a mix. Men and women, young and old, black and white. Spanish, like Mrs. Ortega. A few Orientals now and then. Mrs. Ortega told Hannah, wanted Hannah to know, that she was Puerto Rican, that she wasn't any Mex. That her cousin by marriage owned a store in New York. Didn't just run it but owned it by himself. The cousin would meet her when she got across the bridge. That was the thing; if you knew someone who was already there, someone who would give you a job, then they wouldn't send you back. Everyone else—and Mrs. Ortega included Hannah in the lot—everyone else had to trust to their luck, had to take what they could get.

Hannah didn't care to hear this at all. It was something she had tried hard not to think about. That there were just as many people coming back along the road as going north. People who had been across the bridge. People who couldn't get a job. What kind of people did they want? Hannah wondered. Who got hired, and who got turned away? After a while, everyone seemed to look alike. They looked just like the people going north.

She guessed it was early afternoon. With the rain you couldn't tell. The world ended just beyond the road. There were buildings and houses and telephone poles on either side, all ghostly shapes behind a veil.

"A man, he give you trouble all your life," said Mrs. Ortega. "This is what a man he's gonna do. He give you trouble all your life then trouble when he's dead."

"I wouldn't know about that," Hannah said.

Horns began to blare down the road, and Hannah turned to see circles of yellow light through the rain. Everyone moved to the side. A long line of trucks lumbered by headed north. The trucks were full of scrap iron and heavy metal drums and left the smell of oil and rust. Hannah watched them pass. Mrs. Ortega kept her eyes straight ahead, as if the trucks weren't even there.

A few minutes after that, a car came up from the south, bright lights cutting through the mist. It was long and low and black and its tires hissed on the road. The car was moving fast. It whined past Hannah in a blur. The tail lights winked and disappeared.

"Focking Japs," said Mrs. Ortega.

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"Well I don't know why you say that." Hannah knew she couldn't see inside. The windows were as black as the car.

Mrs. Ortega looked at Hannah like she didn't know anything at all. "They got a big car it's a Jap. Take my word it's a Jap."

"I guess so," Hannah said. She let it go at that. There was no sense arguing with Mrs. Ortega. Mrs. Ortega had her own set opinion on everything there was, and didn't much care to hear yours.

And this time, Hannah had to admit, she was likely close to right. There weren't many cars on the road. You had to be rich to run a car, and there weren't a lot of poor Japanese. Not any Hannah had ever seen.

She thought about the car. About the slick black paint, about the fine black tires, about the chrome that was shiny silver bright, silver bright even in the rain. She wondered how it looked inside. It was warm and it was dry. A woman sat in back. She didn't have to wear a coat. She listened to the car radio. She had a long white dress and gold shoes. She had a ring. The ring had a big green stone. If she lost the ring a nice looking man would say fine, I'll get you another at the store. We'll go out to dinner somewhere then we'll go and get a ring. They go out to dinner and the woman has corn and fresh tomatoes and some cake. The man has a steak. Then they both order ice cream.

Hannah felt beneath her coat and found the string sack she kept inside. She pulled out two green onions, and tore off a hard piece of bread.

Mrs. Ortega shook her head. "You eat while you walk is no good. Eat when you stop. You go and eat ever'thing now you run out."

"I won't run out," Hannah said. "And I'll eat whenever I please."

"Hah!" said Mrs. Ortega. "You don' know nothing. You don' know nothing at all."

When Hannah saw the end of the line she nearly cried. It simply wasn't right. It wasn't how she saw it in her head. In her head there was the line and the bridge and then New York City after that. Everything together, everything there where she could see. Instead, the line stretched off down the highway and vanished in a dismal shroud of rain. Everybody disappeared, just the way they had before.

"Where is it?" she said aloud. "I can't see the bridge."

"Up about a mile," someone said. "A mile or maybe two."

"A *mile?*" Hannah turned and saw the man. He was tall, he was old or maybe young. Rain dripped off his felt hat. "Why, we've already walked about ten!"

"Ten's about it," the man said.

"Don' talk to him," said Mrs. Ortega, who had already edged past Hannah to get ahead.

"I'll talk to anyone I want," Hannah said.

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The man grinned. "Your mother don't care for me at all."

"She is *not* my mother," Hannah said.

"Well then, I'd guess you're all alone. I'd say you're by yourself. Hey, you're a pretty little thing. That coat don't show it but I bet you look fine. I'm Dutch, and I didn't get your name."

Hannah felt the color rise to her face. "Listen, I don't much care for your manners or your talk."

"So? What did I tell you?" said Mrs. Ortega. She didn't bother to turn around.

"I didn't mean no offense," said Dutch. His eyes were rimmed with red. His face was too long and he clearly hadn't shaved in several days.

"You don't even know someone, you shouldn't ought to talk like that," Hannah said. "Even if you know this person, that is not the thing to say."

Dutch looked properly subdued. "I just figured we could talk. There's nothing else to do."

"I don't guess you and I have a thing to talk about."

"You think you'll get a job in New York?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'll do the best I can."

"Shoot, that's all anyone can do." Dutch grinned again. "I got me a skill. I can fix things good. Anything that's broke. Something comes apart, I can put her back right." Dutch showed Hannah a wink, not the wrong kind of wink, but a wink in confidence. "See, that's the thing, you get over 'cross the bridge. You got to have a skill. That's what they want to hear. And even if you don't, if you can't do anything at all, that sure ain't what you want to say. You won't know what they're lookin' for, but you got to say a skill. That's the only chance you got."

"That seems a little risky to me," Hannah said. "I think I'd be scared to say I could do something if I can't."

Dutch looked at Hannah. "You know what scary is, girl? Scary's comin' back across the bridge with no work. You thought you had a quarter but you don't. Isn't nothin' any scarier than that."

"No. I guess not." He didn't have to tell her that he'd done all this before. Hannah didn't have to ask. She didn't know exactly what to say. She knew she had encouraged him to talk. She wished she hadn't but she had. Now she wasn't certain how to stop.

The rain began to pound the road, much harder than before. Not straight down like a rain ought to do, but slanting in furtive and sly, cunning and cold, from here and then from there, whipping in so fast that you couldn't fight it off, couldn't duck inside your coat, couldn't hide beneath your hat. The rain swept down Hannah's collar, bit her face and stung her legs, but she was grateful for the chance to turn away, grateful

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not to have to talk, grateful not to have to think about coming back across without a quarter to her name.

The sound came back down the line, first in a whisper like the wind from far away, then swelling to a rush, one voice drowning out the next.

"The bridge! The bridge! The bridge is right ahead!"

Everyone stretched for a look. The rain had slacked off, settled to a chill and steady drizzle once again. Day was winding down and the saturated sky was a dull oppressive gray. At first Hannah couldn't see a thing. Everything was near, everything was far away. Then she saw the lights, caught her breath, saw the pale white stars strung in long and lacy patterns through the rain, saw the stars loop down in a roller coaster arc, climb again and disappear. Once she saw the lights, Hannah could pick out the towers of the bridge, two immense shadows looming high and out of sight, lost in the mist, in the fast approaching night.

"It's so big," Hannah said. "I never imagined it would look like that."

"George Washington Bridge," said Dutch. He grinned like people do when they've been somewhere before. "There she is, right there, there she is, straight ahead."

"We can see," said Mrs. Ortega. "Nobody here is blind."

"Just pointing out the sights," said Dutch.

"Watch him," said Mrs. Ortega. "I don' like his looks."

"You don't much like nothin'," said Dutch.

As the line grew closer to the bridge, Hannah saw they had come upon a tangle of roads on either side, roads that passed below and overhead, roads that swept in from every side. Trucks rumbled by underneath the people road, going east toward the bridge and coming back, trucks of every shape and size and even black and shiny cars. The highways whispered and hummed. Headlights pierced the vaporous night.

Now there was a new line of people, a new line that came in from the west, a new line moving toward the bridge. The new line kept to the left side of the road, Hannah's to the right. Not a word passed between the two lines. There was nothing anyone had to say. It was clear to everyone in either line: Those people aren't the same as the people over here. They might look the same but they aren't the same at all. They're over there and we are here. They are not in our line. People who had never said hello to whoever was behind them or ahead had something to talk about now. You might be talking to the woman or the man who would steal your job away. But at least they weren't in the other line.

Now the dark towers were directly overhead. The lines moved onto the bridge. At once, Hannah was aware of a new and greater cold, a cold that didn't come from the rain. It swept in from the north. It sang through

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the great webs of cable and steel. It cut through her coat like vicious darts of ice.

"Real bitch, ain't it? That's the Hudson," said Dutch. "You can't see it but it's there."

"Mr. guidebook," said Mrs. Ortega. "Mr. know it all."

"Hey. Excuse me for livin'," said Dutch.

Hannah wondered why they didn't try to keep the bridge clean. There was garbage everywhere. Tin cans and broken glass. Scraps of food ground into the road. Cardboard boxes. Broken wooden crates. Candy wrappers, newspapers, papers of every sort, pressed wet against the rust-colored metal of the bridge.

And the smell. The smell was worst of all. A smell too strong for the wind to blow away. It came from the little tin stalls they'd set up along the sides of the road. Hannah thought about the stalls with growing dread. She had to go. She had to go real bad. She couldn't stand the thought of going *there*. But there was no place else to go.

"Listen, I'll be right back," she told Mrs. Ortega, softly so Dutch couldn't hear. Mrs. Ortega was huddled in her coat. She didn't say anything at all.

Hannah walked quickly along the line. She didn't look at anyone, she kept to the side of the bridge. She saw the flash of headlights from the trucks on the level down below. She saw a red light on the river to the south but it quickly disappeared.

A man was selling food in a shack he'd made from cardboard and wood. He wore a hunting cap pulled down about his ears. His face was bright red from the cold. He had a flashlight hung inside the shack. Hannah could read the prices tacked up against a wall. An apple was a quarter. A sandwich was seventy-five cents. Lord God, on the road you could eat on that for a week. Still, people were lining up to buy.

Hannah tried to hold her breath inside the stall. She got out as quickly as she could. There wasn't any paper, and she tore off a piece of her filling station map and used that. Walking back along the line she heard her name. She turned and looked and there was Cadillac. Up the line maybe twenty yards ahead. Hannah was delighted to see someone she knew. She smiled and started up to say hello. She stopped and looked at Cadillac again. He was standing between two men. One man was heavy, the other man was thin. Both of the men had coats as good as new. Cadillac had a coat too, a red plaid coat that nearly swallowed him whole, and a red cap to match. He grinned at Hannah with a big piece of chicken in his hand. Hannah hadn't tasted chicken in a month or maybe two. One of the men saw Hannah. He saw her wave at Cadillac. He looked right at her and didn't smile. He raised his hand and touched Cadillac's face, touched his face and touched his hair.

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Hannah felt as if the cold had reached in and found her heart. She looked at the man. She couldn't look at Cadillac. She turned away and ran back down the line. People looked up to watch her pass.

"Wha's the matter with you?" said Mrs. Ortega. She looked Hannah up and down. "Huh? You fall ina toilet or what?"

"I am just *fine,* thank you," Hannah said. Good. Now everyone knew where she'd been.

"Okay. You don' look fine to me. You look like you eat something you ought to t'row up." Mrs. Ortega stomped her feet against the cold. "You back jus' in time. Mr. big shot here is telling lies. Like I don' know a lie. Like I don' live with a liar forty year."

"I didn't tell you no lie," Dutch said. "You ain't got the sense to know the truth."

"I know what I know. I don' got to hear a lie."

"Hey, ol' lady. You don't have to do nothin' but complain."

"Mrs. *Ortega*—" It suddenly occurred to Hannah that something wasn't right somewhere. That something had changed while she was gone. That the line wasn't moving anymore. That everyone had stopped. "Do you think something's wrong?" Hannah said. "Why aren't we going anywhere?"

Mrs. Ortega rolled her eyes in patience and despair. "See? You don' know nothing at all."

Dutch laughed as if Hannah had told a joke that he already knew. "The line don't go at night. Not when it's dark. It don't go nowhere in the dark."

"Well why not?"

"It just don't. They hire all day and they close her down at night. Even the niggers and the spics they gotta sleep."

"You watch your mouth," said Mrs. Ortega.

Hannah stared at Dutch. "You mean we have to stay out here? Out here on the bridge?"

"You got it, babe."

"But there's no place to *sleep.*"

"This is the line. It ain't a hotel."

"Well I guess I know that. I guess I've been on the road as long as you."

Hannah knew at once it was the wrong thing to say. Dutch didn't answer. He looked at her a while then hunched down in his coat and turned away. He looked beyond the bridge, past the river and the rain, as if there might be something there to see.

Hannah tried to sleep, tried to huddle up against the cold. She found a piece of cardboard and folded it up across her head. It didn't do a lot

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of good. It kept out the rain but it kept the smells in. The smells were there and they wouldn't go away. She thought about the garbage, the food and the trash and the paper and the glass, pressed in forever on the surface of the bridge. Like the cliff by the creek on the farm, layers of time stacked together like a cake. Her father had known all the names, what the different rocks were called. He told her the names of all the rocks and all the years. But the names were too long, and Hannah couldn't remember them at all.

She wondered if some of the smell was her. She wondered if she smelled as bad as everyone else in the line. Sometimes she'd found a river or a stream. A place far enough from the road. She had tried to get clean, tried to wash as best she could, but she was scared to take everything off. Afraid that someone might come along.

Some people slept. Some people stayed awake and talked. You weren't supposed to make a fire on the bridge, but a lot of people did. Sometimes a policeman came by and made them put the fires out. He drove a little three-wheeled car and wore a heavy leather coat. When he was gone, the people lit the fires again.

"My husban', he don't like to work for Jap," said Mrs. Ortega. "He don' like the way they look."

"I talked to a Jap feller once," said Dutch, "me and him had a drink. He gets to drinkin' real hard he says, hey, I don't like the way you look."

"I think you tell a lie. I don' think he give you any drink."

"Listen, this guy was okay. I'm cutting up scrap for this place and the Jap says, Dutch it's gettin' hot. Stop and have a drink."

"A Jap is not gonna say that. He don' say this to you."

"Sure he did. He don't like the way I look, that's fine. Hey, you're going to work for whoever's got the pay. Don't make no difference to me, niggers, Japs, an' spics. Some guy gives me a dollar a day I say fine. Where you want me to dig? What you like me to fix? It's all the same to me."

"You don' talk like that, Mr. smart aleck, you get across the bridge."

"You think I'm nuts?" Dutch laughed. "Damn right I don't. I say, good morning, Nee-grow, how you doin' Poortoe-rican, sir? Say, I'm glad you burned down the fuckin' town so ol' Dutch can get some work. I sure appreciate that."

"See, now tha's a lie," said Mrs. Ortega. "You gotta tell a lie. Nobody burn it down. Nobody doin' that."

"Right. I guess it burned down all by itself. I guess the city gets up one mornin' says look, I got nothing else to do. I guess I'll burn myself down. I guess that's what I'd like to do."

"I wish you would kindly shut up," Hannah said. "Some people don't want to talk all night. Some people like to sleep."

"So sleep," said Dutch.

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"Don' listen," said Mrs. Ortega. "You don' want to listen, put somet'ing in you ear. Tha's what I think you oughta do."

Hannah turned away. She pretended not to hear. She pretended that the day was just ahead and the sun was warm and bright.

"What I'm going to do," Dutch said, "I'm going to get a good job, maybe fixin' machinery and stuff. They can always use a guy can fix things up. I get this job, I'm going to eat myself sick I'm going to sleep in a bed."

"You goin' to dream about a bed," said Mrs. Ortega. "Tha's what you goin' to do."

"This ain't no dream, ol' lady. I'm gettin' me a job. Right now it's a real good time to be going 'cross the bridge."

"Right. Tha's why ever'body coming back."

"Everybody's coming *back*," Dutch said, "'cause they haven't got a skill. See I got a skill. What I'm thinking is, I'll maybe get on at Times Square. There's all kinds of shit going on there. That's what I'd like to do."

"Hah!" said Mrs. Ortega, "now you a liar again. They don't got a Times Square anymore. Anybody know that. My cousin, he got his own store in New York."

"Big deal," said Dutch. "Listen, they got a Times Square, okay? What they done is a bunch of rich niggers and spics, they're fixin' it up again nice. Bright lights, the whole bit. You got the bread, you can eat and see a show. A nigger, he knows how to make a buck, you gotta hand them that. Fuckin' Jap tourists'll eat it up."

"This is another big lie," said Mrs. Ortega.

"I seen it in a paper," said Dutch. "It's in the paper it ain't a lie."

"I think you make up the paper, too," said Mrs. Ortega. "I think the paper is a lie. This is what a bum he's goin' to do."

She heard the trucks and the cars as they rumbled by below. She heard the wind, she heard the rain. She heard a man singing on a boat. She heard the people talk. She slept and woke up and heard a fight. The policeman came again, riding in his three-wheeled car. He told the people not to fight. He told them not to light a fire.

Once Hannah woke to find the rain had gone away. Dutch was sleeping close against her back. His knees were tucked up against her legs. His big arm was heavy on her waist. Hannah sat up with a start. She waved her icepick in his face.

"Look, you better not do that again," Hannah said.

"Fine. Okay," Dutch said. "Freeze your ass off. What do I care?"

Dawn was bleak and ashen gray. Mist hugged the river and the cold

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steel heights of the bridge, and left a little open space between. Hannah itched all over. She ached everywhere. She felt her eyes were full of sand. People stood up and stirred about. People lined up for the stalls. Hannah swore she wouldn't do that again. She smelled the morning fires, smelled someone cooking food. She chewed on an onion and some bread to make the hunger go away.

Dutch looked awful. His skin was white as paste. He took a paper sack from his coat, took a long swallow and made a face. He saw Hannah watching, grinned and wiped his mouth, and put the sack away.

Hannah reached under her coat, got half a loaf of bread and handed it to Dutch. Dutch looked surprised. He mumbled something like "thanks," as if the word was real hard to get out. He dug past the crust for the softer bread inside.

"Don' give this bum nothing to eat," said Mrs. Ortega.

"I will if I want to," Hannah said.

"Hah! You don' get a job you don' eat. What you say then?"

The line began to move. Hannah tried to find New York, but she couldn't see the end of the bridge. At least the rain had gone away.

"Listen, last night," said Dutch. "I'm sorry 'bout that. I didn't mean nothin' wrong."

"Yes, you did," Hannah said. "Why do you say you didn't if you did?"

"You want a drink I got a little left. It'll warm you up good inside."

"No, thank you," Hannah said.

The line stopped. Someone shouted up ahead. A woman began to scream. Someone took her off and made her stop. A crowd started to gather near the right side of the bridge.

"What's wrong," Hannah said. "Can you see what's going on?"

"What am I, a giant?" said Mrs. Ortega.

Several people ran back along the bridge. People in the line behind Dutch asked what was going on. Dutch said he didn't know. After a while, two policemen appeared in their three-wheeled cars. They told everyone to stand back. They told the line to move along. The line moved slow. Everyone had to see. Whatever it was, Hannah didn't want to look. But when she passed the place she had to look too. There was blood on the bridge. The policemen bent over something white. The blood was dark in the somber morning light. One of the men stood and moved away.

"Oh, *God!*" Hannah said. She stumbled and brought a hand up to her face.

"Hey, so somebody's dead, it's not you," said Mrs. Ortega.

"Jesus," said Dutch. He gripped Hannah's arm.

"I'm just fine," Hannah said. She threw up her onions and her bread.

They'd cut him up bad; cut him bad everywhere. She wondered what they'd done with his clothes, with his red plaid coat and his hat. They

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cut him everywhere but they didn't cut his face. His face was just fine. Were the men still on the bridge, did they go back to the end of the line? His face looked nice. Everything else was real bad but his face was just fine.

It seemed to take forever for the lines to leave the bridge. They wound down ramps and over this and under that, wound past buildings pressed one against the next, packed so tight it was hard to tell which belonged to what. Down through a grim and narrow street to a dark red building where the lines disappeared.

"Hiring hall," said Dutch, before Hannah had to ask. He nodded vaguely to the left. "You don't get work they send you out another door. You don't get to talk to nobody goin' back across the bridge."

"Why not?" Hannah said.

Dutch grinned and picked his teeth. "Shoot, they let you do that, everybody out here's all of a sudden got carpenter skills. They're plumbers or they're good at fixing trucks. Whatever the hell they're hirin' inside."

"Maybe they looking for a dronk," said Mrs. Ortega. "Maybe you get a job quick."

"Maybe you'll have a fuckin' stroke," said Dutch.

As the line drew closer to the door, Hannah was struck by a sudden sense of loss, a feeling like a shudder, like a tremble, like a quake, like a chill that swept back along the line, like a wave of dark despair. She tried to shake away the fear, tried to lose the sense of dread, tried to think good thoughts, but nothing good would come to mind. She was left with the chill and with the fear, with the image of the long walk back across the bridge.

"The line moves slow that's a sign," said Dutch, "that means the hiring's good. It means they're takin' time to talk. You move too fast means they ain't finding anyone they want."

"It looks like we're moving fast to me," Hannah said.

"Yeah, maybe. I'd say kinda in between."

"Don' listen to him," said Mrs. Ortega. "Don' listen to a bum."

The scene inside did nothing to temper Hannah's fears. The room was immense, as wide as the building itself, a big room with harsh white lights and a concrete floor. People sat behind long and narrow desks. They wrote things down. They picked up papers and took them to a desk across the room. The papers were blue and pink and white.

You had to stop at a broad yellow line on the floor. The line was twenty feet from the desk up ahead. You couldn't see, you couldn't hear what people said. The lines were moving fast. Hannah's line and the other to her left. Hannah watched. When you didn't get a job you went out through a door painted red. Hannah counted in her head. Seven-eight-nine-

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ten. . . . nineteen-twenty-twenty-one. Hannah's heart sank. Everyone was going through the door.

"Oh, Lord," Hannah said. "They aren't hiring anyone at all!"

"Hey, you don't know, you can't never tell," said Dutch.

They hired someone at twenty-five. Another at twenty-nine. Then no one clear to forty-one. Mrs. Ortega was forty-two.

Hannah stood with her toes on the line. A black man sat behind a desk. He wore a blue shirt and blue tie. He spoke to Mrs. Ortega. Mrs. Ortega spoke to him. The man shook his head. There was a coffee cup full of yellow pencils on the desk. Mrs. Ortega picked them up, cup and all, and threw them at the man. The man stood and backed away.

"I don' need you focking job," screamed Mrs. Ortega. "I got family. I got a cousin owns a store!"

The man looked shocked and surprised. Yellow pencils rolled about the floor. Two men rushed in from the left. They picked up Mrs. Ortega and hurried her quickly across the room.

"My cousin he is coming," shouted Mrs. Ortega. Her short legs kicked at the air. "You wait. He is coming soon. My husban' is dead. He drives a Jap trock an' he is dead. My cousin owns a store."

"Oh, dear," Hannah said, "I hope she'll be okay."

"Serves her right," said Dutch.

"It does not. Don't you talk that way."

"Yeah, right."

"Next," said the man at the desk.

Hannah could scarcely move. The twenty feet seemed like a mile. The man looked her up and down. Hannah stopped before the desk. The man looked at her again. He opened his mouth to speak. Another man came up behind his chair. The man at the desk turned away. He leaned back to talk. Hannah looked at the papers on his desk. The man had them covered with his hand. Hannah looked again. There were only two words she could see. The words said ƎTIL ʌƎM. ʌƎM was half a word. The rest lay beneath the man's thumb. The man turned back and Hannah quickly looked away.

"Experience," said the man.

"I beg your pardon?" Hannah said.

The man pointed a pencil at her chest. "What do you do, what kind of work?"

"Oh, sorry." Hannah's mind raced. She didn't want to say tile. Not right off. Tile might give her away.

"Brick," Hannah said. "I've done a lot of work in brick."

"You work in brick?" The man seemed surprised.

"Brick, stone, tile, anything like that."

"Doing what?"

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"I can lay brick good. I've made a lot of walls. I can do 'bout anything with tile."

"Let me see your hands," said the man.

Hannah held out her hands. The man ran a finger down her palm. Hannah held her breath, thankful for the first time in her life that she had grown up on a farm.

The man made a mark on a blue piece of paper and handed it to Hannah. "Table Five," he said. He didn't look up. He didn't look at Hannah again.

Hannah was stunned. She couldn't believe she had a job. She had work in New York. She didn't have to go back across the bridge. She found Table Five. It was two rows down. A black girl her own age took the paper from her hand. The girl was awfully clean.

"Here's your chits," said the girl. "The yellow's for housing, the green one's for a meal. This is your button. Put it on and don't take it off. Hang onto your button and your chits. We don't give 'em out twice. Go through the door that says Nine." The girl made a mark on the paper and gave it back.

Food. Housing, Hannah thought. Things were looking better all the time. She found Door Nine. She turned and looked back. Mrs. Ortega was in a chair across the room. The chair looked big. Or Mrs. Ortega looked small. At least she was still inside the room. She wasn't out the red door.

Hannah suddenly remembered she hadn't even thought about Dutch. She felt bad about that. She looked about the room, and couldn't find him anywhere at all. She looked at the button on her coat. It said 939. It occurred to her, then, that no one had asked her for her name.

Hannah was shocked when the woman said take off your clothes, but she did as she was told. The woman handed her a towel and a bar of yellow soap. Leave your stuff here, the woman said, and Hannah did.

The shower was a pleasant surprise. The soap had a medicine smell, but the water was strong and steamy hot. There were seven other women in the showers nearby. Hannah didn't look at them and they didn't look at her. You could stay five minutes, a sign told you that. Hannah wanted to spend the day. She wanted to let the water wash every mile away.

In a room off the shower, a woman gave Hannah a green jumpsuit and a pair of tennis shoes. The suit wasn't new and didn't fit too well but it was clean. It smelled just like the yellow soap. Hannah's old clothes and her button and her chits were in a sack. Her food was there too, and her seventeen cents and her map. The icepick was gone.

A long hall led to a big room with tables and chairs. Hannah could smell the food before she even reached the room. The smell went right

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to her belly, and the pain nearly brought her to her knees. She tried not to cry but the hurt spilled over to her eyes.

The stew was hot and thick. There was fresh bread and coffee and sugar in a bowl. The sign said you could go back for more and Hannah did. The room was half full. The women sat apart from the men. There were green jumpsuits like her own, blues and blacks and reds.

"Where you from?" said a girl at Hannah's right.

"Nebraska," Hannah said.

"South Carolina," said the girl. She had a long face. Hollow cheeks and hollow eyes. "I wish I wasn't scared. I hope it's goin' to be all right."

"I guess we'll be fine," Hannah said.

"I'm LuAnn," the girl said.

"Hannah," Hannah said.

"You ever heard of Scotia? That's in Hampton County, right close to Estill."

"I don't think I have. I've never been too far from home until now."

A loudspeaker on the wall said, "Greens to the bus. Two minutes. Give your paper to the driver outside."

"That's me," Hannah said. She wolfed down the last of her stew. "You take care, okay?"

"I'll sure try," said LuAnn.

Hannah took her bowl and her cup back to the line. The girl looked lonely and afraid. Maybe I do too, Hannah thought. Maybe everyone here looks the same.

The street signs passed in a blur. 155th . . . 146th . . . Lord, who'd ever guess streets could go that high! Traffic was light. There were people everywhere, but Hannah saw few trucks or cars. The bus raced south like it was going to a fire. There was so much to see, too much to take in at one time but Hannah tried. The broad street was called Amsterdam Avenue. Long rows of buildings stretched out on either side, grim red buildings with tiny shops and markets jammed between. A movie and a church. A park with no trees. Everyone Hannah saw was black. Sometimes a street looked shabby and dark. Sometimes it looked nice. A man selling food on a corner waved at Hannah, and Hannah waved back.

Leaden clouds still drifted overhead. Hannah thought about the people on the bridge. She wondered if Mrs. Ortega was still sitting in her chair. She wondered if Dutch was headed back.

"Hey, you like New York okay?"

Hannah nearly jumped when the girl swept into the seat beside her. "Yes. I mean I guess I like it fine."

The girl flashed a smile. She looked at Hannah's button. She thumbed through the stack of blue papers in her hand. Hannah was struck by the

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dark and startling beauty of the girl. Black hair and black eyes, cinnamon colored skin that seemed to shine. A new red jumpsuit that fit. Hannah touched her own hair, and wished she had a brush.

"So, a construction worker, no? Brick and tile." The girl looked at Hannah and laughed. "Boy, that is a big lot of bullshit, 939, you know that?"

"It certainly is not." Hannah was alarmed. "That's what I do."

"Right. Who cares? I'm Catana Pérez. So who are you?"

"I'm Hannah."

"Hannah what?"

"Hannah Gates."

"Gates. Like you swing in and out alla time, huh?"

"They used to tease me some in school."

"And where is that?"

"Nebraska. My father had a farm."

"Had. He don't got it now?"

"It went broke. He couldn't pay it off."

"An' your father, now he is *muerto,* he is dead."

"I didn't say that."

"You don' have to say. You are what, fifteen?"

"No! I'm seventeen, eighteen in May."

"Dios." Catana made a face. "You watch yourself, okay? The dogs, the *perros,* they gonna bark plenty at you. You're a real pretty girl. You got nice yellow hair. I guess you got tits somewhere, I don' know. See, you gonna blush a little, huh? The *perros* they goin' to bark. You don' listen. You don' bark back, you okay. You understand what I say?"

"I think I do."

"Ah, *sí.* That's exactly what I mean. What am I gonna do with you?"

"You don't have to do a thing," Hannah said. "I'm just fine."

Catana leaned in close. Hannah smelled a light flower perfume.

"Okay. I can see what's in your head," Catana said. "This girl, she ask a lot of questions to me. Why she want to do that? Because this is what I do. I ask people stuff all day. I see you get on the bus and get where you gotta go. That's my job that's what I do. It's better than construction work, no?"

Hannah had to smile. "Yeah, I guess so."

"You bet."

"Listen, are you a Puerto Rican? Is it all right to ask?"

"Cuban. *Cubano.* That's even better, but don't tell the PRs, they don' know."

Hannah glanced out the window again. She was surprised how things had changed. The buildings weren't so grim anymore. Most of the shops had a fresh coat of paint. The streets were fairly clean. People ate under

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red and white umbrellas outside. A store that sold flowers spilled its wares out on the street. It looked as if a garden had blossomed in cement.

Catana seemed to read Hannah's thoughts. "Looks a little better, right? You're out of the Heights now, girl. You on the Upper West Side." Catana touched the tip of her nose and raised it a quarter of an inch. "Pretty good place to be. Very nice."

Hannah shook her head. "I guess I'm getting real confused. Everybody says the city burned down, but it doesn't look very burned to me. Everything looks fine. You can't tell anything at all."

Catana showed no expression at all. "Hannah Gates. Hannah Gates from off the farm. I bet you milk a focking cow."

"I just asked," Hannah said.

"Yeah. Okay." Catana traced a shape like a pickle on the seat. "It don't burn up here. The fire is down there. Everything from Downtown to Midtown. Up to Central Park. On the East Side, maybe little more. 67th, okay? On the West Side, up to 59th. That's where you gonna go. 59th." She looked up at Hannah. "This don' mean a thing, right? You don' know where you are. You don' know where you go. You don' know what you gonna do."

"I do tile," Hannah said, "tile and brick."

"Yeah, right." Catana rolled her eyes like Mrs. Ortega. "Miss 939 tile and brick. I don't think you ever *see* a tile before, but that's what you gonna do. You chip and shine, you fix the subway up fine. All the tourists say, hey, everything is lookin' nice. I bet Miss 939 she been by."

"The subway?" Hannah tried not to show her alarm.

"Sure the subway, what you think? That's why you got a green suit." Catana laughed. "You work real hard, maybe you shine all the way to Times Square. Maybe you get to see the sights."

"I know all about Times Square," Hannah said. "I read about it in a paper one time."

"Hey, she can read a paper, too. We are plenty locky you come across the bridge." Catana paused. "Listen, I tell you a couple things. Stuff you need to know. You learn where you stay. How to get to work. You don' go out after dark until you know pretty good where you are. They give you a meal tonight after work. You don' gotta have a chit. After that, buy your own food at the *bodega* where it's cheap."

Catana glanced over her shoulder, then turned to face Hannah again. "What you don' do most of all is go asking someone about the fire. That's ten, eleven years back, okay? That's gone. Don' go talking 'bout that. Nobody wants to hear."

Hannah was startled. "I just *asked*. I don't see anything wrong with that."

Something changed in Catana's eyes. "You don' see nothing wrong

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because you got a white face. Everybody got a white face thinks they know about the fire. They got all the answers in their head."

"I don't think anything at all," Hannah said.

"Yeah, right. So I tell you this. Then you don' gotta ask. The fire don' start up here. Where it starts is down *there*. Okay? Where everybody had a face as white as you. You think about tiles. You think about making two dollars every day."

Catana touched Hannah on the shoulder and stood. "Hey, you gonna do real good. You gonna do fine."

Hannah didn't want to be mad at Catana but she was. The girl didn't have to get up and walk away. She didn't have to leave. What did I do? Hannah thought. I asked a question is all. I asked about the fire. What's so bad about that? It isn't any secret, everybody knows about the fire. I didn't talk like Dutch. I didn't say nigger and spic. The girl tried to act pleasant after that, but she did get up and walk away.

The bus moved south. The farther south they went, the nicer things became. Traffic picked up at 86th. The bus slowed down at 81st. There were places to eat everywhere. The people were black and brown. A few were even white. Hannah saw a fine hotel. A place to eat Japanese food. The bus stopped again at 69th. On the corner, there were six men hanging from a pole. Six men and a girl. Hannah couldn't tell what color they had been. Everyone's face had turned black. Someone had made a sign, and hung it at the base of the pole. The sign said, MAKE BIG MONEY IN DRUGS. No one glanced at the people who were hanging from the pole. People bought flowers on the street, but no one looked up at the pole.

The bus moved on. Hannah saw places to eat and things to buy. People rushing everywhere about, people walking little dogs. Someone behind her said, hey, there's Lincoln Center, I read about that, and Hannah looked and saw pretty white buildings, a big opera house. But mostly she saw the people hanging on the corner with their faces turning black.

The bus came to a stop, and the driver said, "Columbus Circle, everybody out."

Everyone in the bus began to talk. Hannah made her way down the aisle and outside. Catana was there and she smiled and said hello. Maybe everything was all right.

Hannah marveled at the big traffic circle, a column with a statue on the top. A tall glass building, a corner of the park. There were people everywhere, trees and grass, a man selling bright balloons. A dozen sights to see, but every eye turned to the south. To the burned and ragged

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spires, to the towers black as night, to the dark and ruined shells of steel and glass stark against a sullen sky.

Hannah was chilled by the grim and awesome sight. The dead city cast a charred shadow on the city still alive. It's much too close, Hannah thought. It shouldn't be as close as that. It ought to be somewhere far away. I don't want to live in a place that's all dead, I don't want to clean tiles. I don't like it here at all.

"Okay, Greens," Catana said, "line up, let's go." She laughed, as if the sound might make the shadows disappear. "Let's get under New York, let's get to work, let's make a couple dollars today." ●

THE RETURN OF THE KITE MAN

It's too windy to fly a kite today, son!
Get out of the neighbor's tree!

Remember what your mother said before she fled:
"Each green pod is full of peas.
Shell one and they all get shelled."
Remember her paring knife . . . all the boiling pots.
Little wonder the old girl took to the sky.

It's too windy for a kite today, son!
Telephone poles are swaying back and forth.
Crows are soaring straight-winged.
It'll take the down off your ears
and you won't have a leg left to land on.

Forget those holes in the sky.
Listen to me, your dear old Dad!
Forty-six and my head clean as an eggshell.
Been ploughing the wind too damn long.

Get out of that tree!
What will the neighbors think?
Are you really my own true blood?

Remember your poor dear mother,
the bright broken pins in her hair,
that sad and cloudy nimbus in her eyes
before she blew away with the Kite Man!

—Bruce Boston

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TRAVELING WEST

by Pat Murphy

Pat Murphy's latest story is the beautifully written tale of a young girl, her mysterious companion Nadia, and their adventures "Traveling West." The author tells us this story is the first in a series she plans to write about Nadia. Ms. Murphy's latest publications include a novel, *The City, Not Long After,* and a short story collection, *Points of Departure.* Both are currently available in paperback from Bantam Books.

art: Bob Walters

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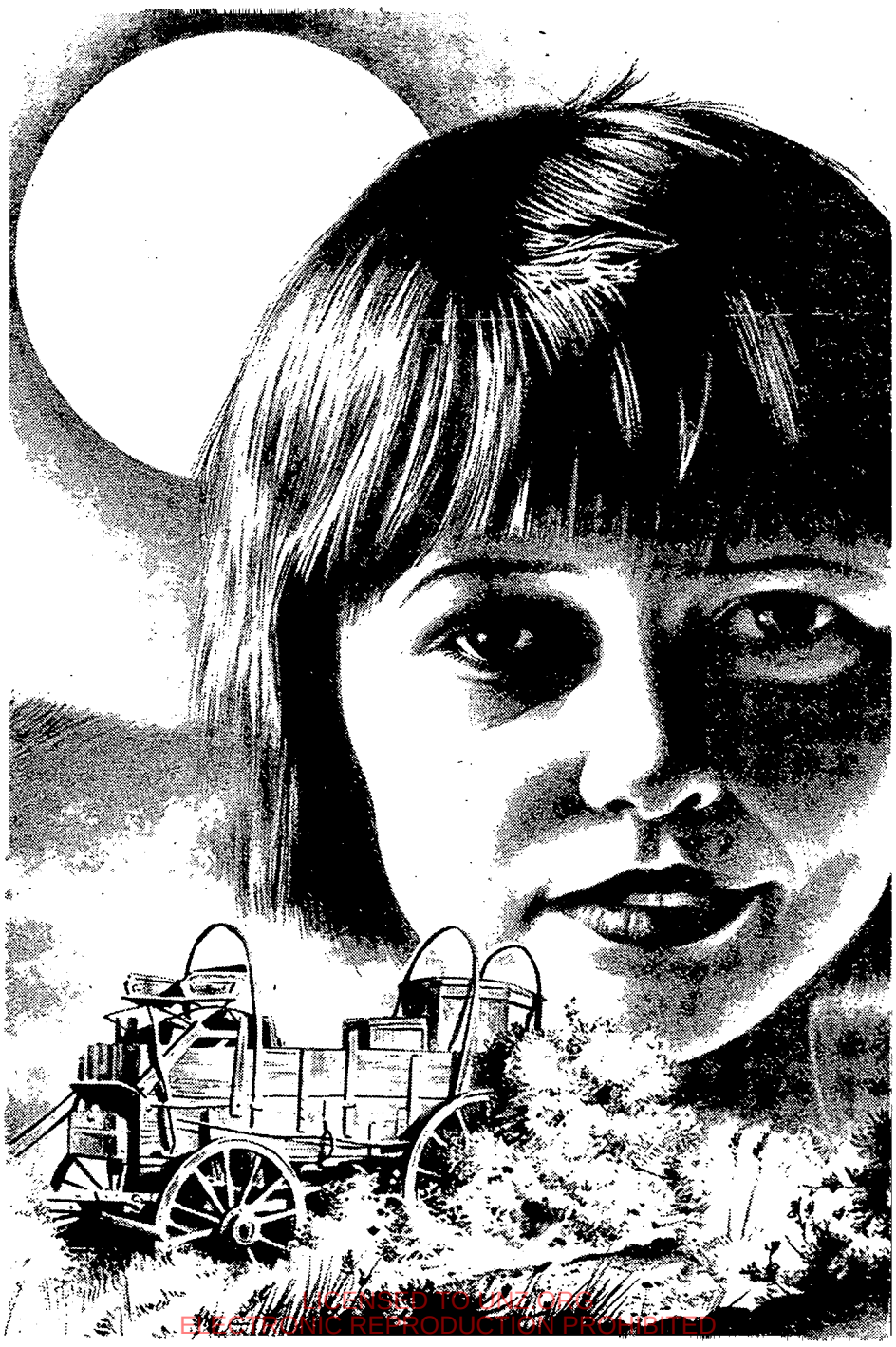

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I was ten years old when my father sold our farm and packed our belongings into a wagon that he had spent all winter building. He hitched up a team of oxen, tied the horse and mule behind, and turned our steps westward, to California.

The year before, his brother had emigrated to California. My father had received only one letter from my uncle. It told of beautiful valleys that begged to be planted, a temperate climate where snow never fell, a paradise on earth.

And so, in the spring of 1849, we headed west. It took almost a month for us to cross Iowa and reach the banks of the Missouri River. I remember the first part of the trip as a cozy sort of adventure. To me, the wagon was a wonderful place: a moving house carrying all that my father, my mother, and I could ever need. I lay in the wagon, watching the slabs of smoked bacon that hung from the crossbeams swaying with each jounce.

At Council Bluffs, we reached our jumping-off place, where we left civilization behind. We joined a group of wagons waiting to be ferried over the Missouri River. While my father went to talk with the ferryman, my mother and I stayed with the wagon. I saw my first Indian wandering among the waiting wagons. He was a wild-looking man with a half-shaven head and a painted face. He wore a bit of red calico wrapped around his bare shoulders like a shawl, and he returned my stare with eyes as hard and shiny as wet pebbles. I saw buckskin-clad mountain men, squatting on the Missouri River's muddy bank and playing some sort of gambling game.

"Hello, little girl," one of them called to me. "Where are you going?"

"California," I called from the seat of the wagon. "We're bound for California." My mother put a hand on my shoulder to stop me from bouncing up and down on the seat in excitement.

The mountain man approached, taking off his broad-brimmed hat and holding it respectfully in both hands. "No disrespect, ma'am," he said to my mother. "It's late in the season to be setting out. You'd best be careful."

My mother just smiled at him and nodded. "Thank you for your concern," she said.

My father returned then, with news that we could join a company bound for California. We left the mountain man and his advice behind, but I waved as the oxen pulled us slowly away.

An uncertain-looking wooden raft ferried our wagon across the river; the oxen, the horse, and the mule followed, swimming across the muddy water. On the far side, we joined the other wagons in our company—five families in all. The captain of the company, a bluff man, clapped my father heartily on the shoulder, saying that they needed more brave men, since they were heading through Indian country.

The day we set forth was sunny—brave and hopeful weather. I walked

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beside the wagon and searched for wildflowers among the prairie grasses. I picked the brightest flowers and brought them to my mother, who exclaimed with delight. In the evening, we circled the wagons and made camp. It was like a picnic; I was safe with my mother and father.

We followed the ruts that other wagons had worn in the prairie grass, heading always westward. Once we passed three graves, marked with crude wooden crosses. The wolves had been at them, leaving a scattering of fresh dirt across the trail. My mother turned her head away as we passed.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of steady rain on the canvas wagontop. More than once that day, the wagon bogged down in mud and we all had to climb out and stand in the wet while the oxen and the men labored to rock the wheels free. By the day's end, when we reached the Loup Fork of the Platte River, we were all soaked to the skin and cold to the bone.

The Loup Fork was known for its treachery. The river bottom was laced with deep channels and pockets of quicksand that some said could swallow a wagon and team. It took the best part of a day, working in the rain and mud, to get our wagon train across. We forded at a narrow point, where the river bottom was thought to be solid, hitching a double team of oxen to each wagon to haul it across, then swimming the oxen back to haul another wagon. When our turn came, my mother and I clung to the wagon, watching the water lap at the wagonbed. But the wagonbed was solidly built and carefully caulked. It floated like a boat and carried us across to safety.

Even so, the day was a miserable one. My father worked valiantly, helping others in the train long after my mother advised him to rest. At suppertime, he sat in the wagon, wrapped in a blanket and trying to warm himself.

The next day, he fell ill, a fever brought on by the chill he had caught. That day, he rode in the wagon. I sat with him while my mother drove the team. The fever was a bad one—he tossed in his bed and moaned each time the wagon jounced over a rut.

After a day of that, my mother insisted that we stop to nurse him back to health. Given the lateness of the season, the others of the wagon train refused to stop. The captain advised that we continue with the train and put my father's fate in God's hands. But my mother was a stubborn woman.

I stood beside her as the wagon train departed, leaving our solitary wagon behind. The weather had cleared; the sky was blue above us. The prairie spread around us, flat and smooth, a sea of grass, lacking a tree or anything that could properly be called a hill. The Platte River flowed beside us, a placid, slow-moving current of muddy water. The river

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marked our trail westward. When my father recovered, we planned to follow the river, hurrying after the wagon train and catching them, we hoped, the next time they stopped for a day to rest the oxen.

That was not to be. My mother nursed my father tenderly, soothing his fever with rags cooled in river water, dosing him with whiskey and tea. Despite her efforts, he died in his bed on the second day after the wagon train left us. My mother, weary from her nursing, fell ill that same day, and I tended her as she had tended my father. She lay in the wagon, not four feet from his dead body, and I sat by her side and prayed that God would not leave me an orphan.

That first night, I sat by my mother's side until just after sunset. She had been sleeping fitfully, but she opened her eyes then and asked for a cup of tea.

Encouraged to see her looking better, I left the stuffy confines of the wagon, stepping out into the evening breeze. The full moon was rising; the prairie grasses looked gray in its pale light. The horse and mule, picketed nearby, looked up with interest and nickered, hoping for a handful of grain. The oxen were tethered not far from the wagon. By the light of the full moon, I built a fire of dried buffalo chips and weeds and heated river water to a boil.

I was pouring boiling water from the kettle into the teapot when I saw a gray shadow move among the grazing oxen. As I watched, the shadow lifted its head and met my gaze with eyes that reflected yellow in the moonlight. A great gray wolf, as big as I was, stared at me.

I froze, terrified. I had never seen a wolf, but I had heard them howling in the night; their wails made me shiver and draw the covers up over my head. I had nothing to defend myself with but a teapot and a kettle of boiling water. I stared back at the beast, my heart pounding.

"Sarah Ann!" my mother called from the wagon. "Sarah Ann!"

At the sound of my mother's voice, the beast pricked up its ears. With a glance in the direction of the wagon, it trotted away, moving with an uneven gait, as if one of its paws were injured.

I hurried to my mother's side, bringing her a cup of hot tea. Not wanting to add to her worries, I did not tell her about the wolf; I just said that the fire had been difficult to start. She did not ask much. It took all her strength to sit up in bed and sip a cup of tea. When I let her be, she lay down and did not move again.

I slept that night wrapped in a blanket by my mother's side. She moaned in her sleep and tossed fitfully. Once, she called for water and I brought her a dipper from the bucket. When she drank, she looked at me with wild and feverish eyes, as if she did not recognize her own daughter.

In the morning, when sunlight shining through the canvas of the

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wagon woke me, my mother was not breathing. Her eyes were open and staring. Her skin, when I touched her, was cold and stiff. I backed away, not knowing what to do. God had not answered my prayers. I climbed out of the wagon, staring around me wildly.

The wind blew across the open prairie, making the grass whisper and sway. In all directions, there was only the grass: not a wagon, not a person, not even a tree standing above the flatness. The bell on the lead ox's neck rang softly as he moved his head, searching for the best grass. I was alone in the wilderness and there was no one to help me. I had spent my childhood under the protection of my mother and father, but that protection was gone.

I'm not too proud to say that I sat in the grass and wept. I was ten years old and there was nothing else to do. When my tears ran dry, my pain and panic gave way to a kind of numbness. I knew my duty to my parents. I had to bury them as deep as I could, so that their bodies would be safe from wolves.

I took the shovel from the back of the wagon and I walked to the bluff beside the river. The soil was baked hard in the sun, and I scratched at the unyielding earth for an hour without making a very big hole. At one point I realized that I was not wearing my sunbonnet and my mother would be angry. Then my tears came afresh, because I knew that my mother would never be angry with me again.

I was wiping away my tears when I heard the sound of a human voice, a woman's voice I thought, raised in song. The words were not in English; the tune, a rollicking melody, was not familiar. I looked up and saw a figure on a horse, riding along the river bank. A scout for another wagon train, I thought, and I waved. "Hello," I cried. "Hello there."

The stranger rode on a spotted horse, the kind I had seen Indians riding near Council Bluffs. I dropped my hand then, suddenly remembering stories of children who had been captured by Indians and scalped or raised as savages. But I was too late; the stranger had seen me.

The voice had sounded like a woman, but the stranger was dressed like a man: in deerskin trousers, a plain brown shirt, and a broadbrimmed black hat. The stranger rode near, pushing back the hat and squinting at me in the sunshine. Though the face beneath the hat was tanned by the sun, the chin was beardless and the features were feminine.

"Please," I said. "Is your wagon train coming?"

"I'm not with a wagon train." A woman's voice. She spoke with an accent that reminded me of some German farmers we had met, but her voice was more lilting and musical. "I travel alone." She glanced at our wagon and the grazing animals and then looked toward the horizon, as if she were eager to be on her way. A bedroll and saddlebags were tied behind her saddle; she carried a rifle and wore a pistol at her belt.

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"Please," I said again, the words spilling out in a rush. "My mama and papa are dead. I'm digging their grave." Then tears stopped me from saying more. I hid my face in my hands.

I heard the woman swing down from her horse. I thought for a moment that she would stop to comfort me, but she walked past. I glanced up and saw her peer into the back of the wagon and mutter something in a foreign language. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand, and lifted my head to meet her eyes as she returned.

She was a small woman, only a little taller than me. Young, I thought—no more than eighteen years old. Her face had been browned by the sun until she was as dark as an Indian. Like some of the Indians I had seen, she wore her long dark hair pulled back in a single braid. She smelled of horse sweat and dust and campfire smoke.

As she took the reins of her horse in her right hand, I noticed that she was crippled. There was a mass of white scar tissue where the smallest two fingers should have been. The scar tissue continued in a pale line that extended from the palm to disappear into her sleeve.

As I studied her, she looked me over. By her expression, she found me wanting. I have no doubt that I was a sight: my dusty face streaked with tears, my hands filthy and blistered from digging. But something about the look she gave me cut through my numbness and sorrow, raising anger in its place.

"Do you have any kin?" she asked me brusquely.

"My uncle lives in California," I said. "That's where I'm going." It was only in that moment that I realized that I was going on to California alone. Always before, I had said "We are going to California."

"Are you now?"

I nodded. "I have to catch up to the wagon train. They left us three days ago."

"Can you ride?"

"Yes," I lied. "But I can't saddle the horse by myself."

"I see." She kept looking at me. I knew that I had not convinced her, but she did not question me further. "I can help you," she said—reluctantly, I thought. "We will catch your wagon train and get you on your way to California."

I suddenly realized that I did not know her name. "I'm Sarah Ann," I said.

"My name is Nadia." She held out her maimed hand and I shook it gingerly. She did not seem to notice my reluctance, taking my hand firmly in hers. I could feel the rough scar tissue against my palm.

She started to turn away, heading toward the horse. I clutched the shovel and did not move. She glanced back at me.

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"I have to bury my mama and papa," I said. "I can't just leave them here."

She studied me again, as if revising her original assessment. "You are a stubborn child," she said. Her tone had changed—I think she approved of my stubbornness. But the expression on her face did not change.

In the end, she did most of the digging. That afternoon, we buried my mother and father in shallow graves by the riverside. She did not talk much, and I did not want to talk. I worked in a daze, gathering rocks from the riverbank and heaping them on top of the graves to discourage Indians and wolves from digging up the bodies.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was low in the sky, I asked Nadia if we could make a marker for the graves. She used my father's saw to cut the handle of the shovel into two pieces. She lashed one to the other to form a crude cross, which she planted at the head of the grave.

When the cross was in place, I looked at the grave and suggested that we pray. Nadia shrugged. "I don't pray," she said. "But you do as you like."

I stared at her. This admission was even more startling than her peculiar way of dressing and her strange accent. I did not know anyone who did not pray. "Why don't you pray?" I asked her.

"Your God doesn't listen to me," she said casually.

I wondered at that. What other God was there, if this one was mine? Besides God often didn't listen to me either. He had taken my parents and left me an orphan, despite my prayers.

Still, my mother and father had always told me to pray. I knelt down and thought for a while. Then I asked God to take care of Mama and Papa and to guide me on my way. Nadia stood nearby, looking out over the smooth water of the Platte. When I was done, she walked with me back to the wagon.

"Tomorrow we will be on our way," she said. "We'll pack what we need on the oxen and leave the wagon behind. Too much trouble for us if we hope to catch your wagon train."

I nodded, willing to abandon the wagon as long as she did not leave me behind.

That night, I made fruit compote from the dried apples and pears that my mother had been saving for a special occasion. We cooked biscuits and chipped beef over a fire that Nadia built using some wood from the wagon. "Might as well burn what we need," she said. "We won't be taking it with us."

It felt strange to see the wood burning. Ever since we set out on the plains, wood had been so precious. Exhausted from the long day, I sat beside Nadia and watched the flames dance along the seasoned hardwood slats. The pale moonlight cast dark shadows on the prairie grass. Nadia's

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shadow shifted and swayed with the movement of the grasses in the night wind.

In the distance, a wolf yipped once, then howled. Its wailing cry was joined by others, a wild chorus that made me shiver. I sat with my legs up, my arms wrapped around them. I missed my mother; I missed my father. I felt unprotected and alone. I glanced at Nadia and found her watching me.

"You don't care for the music?" she said.

"Music?" I shook my head, puzzled by her words.

"The music of the wolves."

"They sound like they want to come tear us apart."

"Have you ever seen a wolf?" She looked at me as if she already knew the answer.

I nodded.

"And that wolf, did she come tear you apart?" Her eyes challenged me.

I shook my head.

"You don't understand the wolves," Nadia said softly. "They are calling to the moon. The world is a big and empty place. They cry out and listen for an answer." She listened to the chorus rise again, then tipped her head back, barked once, and let loose a howl that echoed across the empty land. When the wolves answered, she smiled at me for the first time, a quick flash of white teeth in a brown face.

I was fascinated. For a moment, I forgot my loneliness. "Would they answer me if I howled?"

"Try," Nadia suggested.

Cautiously, I barked once, a small sound that was barely louder than the croaking of the frogs in the river.

"You bark like a puppy," she said contemptuously. "You can do better."

I barked again, louder and deeper this time.

"Better," she said. "Now howl. Let the moon hear you."

I fixed my gaze on the moon's pale face and howled. The sound began small and then swelled, as if it had been waiting, deep inside me, for this moment. All I had to do was release it. Nadia joined me with a deep wail that made the air ring.

The distant wolves answered, and I felt Nadia's hand on my shoulder. "They heard us," she said.

The wind blew, making the fire flare. The shadows shifted in the moving grass. I barked again, then wailed, my howl rising on the wind.

That night, Nadia laid her blankets beside the fire, saying that she preferred sleeping in the open to the confines of the wagon. At first, I climbed into the wagon, thinking to spend one last night in my familiar bed. Though I was very tired, I could not fall asleep. Finally, I slipped from the wagon, taking my blanket with me, and I lay down beside

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Nadia. My footsteps must have awakened her. Her eyes glimmered in the moonlight. I fell asleep, listening to the steady rhythm of her breathing.

The next day, Nadia packed the mule and the oxen with goods that she deemed most valuable for trade: my father's rifle and pistol, his pouch of tobacco, my mother's silver-handled mirror (an heirloom from her grandmother), the bacon, the coffee, a bag of dried beans, two bags of flour, two bolts of cloth. She let me select the things that I wanted to take: my mother's Bible, my father's buck knife, a bag of hard candy. The letter from my uncle in California was tucked in the Bible, and I took that, too.

Nadia saddled the horse and boosted me into the saddle. I had my dress awkwardly tucked around my legs so that I could ride astride, and I clung to the saddlehorn desperately, but I stayed on. The horse was an even-tempered beast, bred for the plow rather than the saddle, and he ignored my presence on his back. Nadia tied my horse's lead rope to the back of her saddle and tied the mule and the oxen behind my horse in a long train.

We rode in silence at first. Every now and then, Nadia would speak, telling me of things that I had not noticed before. "That fellow," she said, pointing high in the sky where a bird soared. "Prairie falcon. He's hunting now. There." The bird dove, disappeared for a moment in the tall grass, and then reappeared, flapping its wings and bearing something—a mouse, Nadia said—in his talons.

"Antelope," she said another time, pointing to a flicker of movement, vanishing into the tall grass. "Half dozen of them."

When we passed a prairie dog town, the small rodents stood up on their mounds and barked at us. Nadia barked back, and the prairie dogs all dove into the safety of their holes, emerging only after we were long past.

That first night, as we made camp, Nadia sniffed the breeze. "We'll have fresh meat for dinner," she said. Taking her rifle, she walked away from camp, her head held high as if she were catching a scent. I was on my way to the river to fill the kettle with water for tea, when I heard a shot. I headed toward the sound. Not far away, I found Nadia, disembowling an antelope. The entrails steamed in the evening air.

Nadia's attention was on the work at hand. She did not hear me coming up behind her. She flipped the body to one side to let the blood drain from the body cavity. As I watched, she got to her feet, holding her knife in one hand and a bloody piece of meat in the other. With an air of relish, like a child with an unexpected treat, she sliced off a bit of meat, still warm and bloody, and popped it in her mouth.

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"Nadia," I called, startled.

She turned to face me, licking a drop of blood off her lips. She studied me for a moment, her face expressionless. "Fresh meat for dinner," she said.

I took a step back, momentarily frightened, but she remained motionless.

"Come and help me carry it to camp," she said.

I hesitated for a moment, and then I went to her. That night, I chopped the antelope meat for stew. When Nadia wasn't looking, I tasted a bit of the raw meat. Salty and harder to chew than cooked meat, but not so bad.

The sun was high the next day when I saw the white canvas of a wagon in the distance. I pointed to it, calling to Nadia in my excitement. I could make out only one wagon clearly, its canvas bright in the sunlight. There were others beyond it, but something was wrong with them. Their canvas had been stripped away, I thought, but why would anyone do that? As we rode closer, we saw that the wagons were motionless. Some of them had been burned black by fire.

Nadia reined in her horse, and mine bumbled to a stop. She held her head high, sniffing the air, then urged her horse forward, at a walk. A little farther on, a man's body was sprawled across the trail. Buzzing flies rose from the body.

Nadia stopped again and glanced at my face. "I know him," I said. "He is . . . he was the captain of the wagon train." I stared down at the body.

Nadia untied my horse and gave me the lead to hold. "Stay here," she said, and rode toward the stationary wagons, leaving me to watch the flies lazily circle the captain's body while my horse cropped grass. I tried not to look at the dead man. I kept my gaze on Nadia. She peered into the back of each wagon, and then turned and rode back to me.

"Indian attack," she said, frowning. "I wonder what provoked it."

I glanced down at the captain's body again. "He said . . . he used to say that he would kill himself some wild Indians when he got out West," I told her.

Her expression was grim. She nodded. "Stupid man," she said callously. "Maybe he thought he could kill an Indian and pay nothing for it." She reined her horse to the side, leaving the trail and leading me in a wide circle around the wagons. When the wagons were far behind us, she said, "There are men who think they have the right to kill anything they choose. They are surprised to learn otherwise. I expect your captain was surprised when he died." I stayed silent, cowed by her disapproval.

When we had left the wagons far behind, I gathered my courage and asked Nadia what we would do, since I could not rejoin the wagon train. "There'll be other wagon trains," she said grimly. "There are always

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more white men heading West." She glanced at me, her expression softening, but she said nothing more.

Each day, we rode beside the river; each night, we slept under the stars. I grew used to Nadia's unpredictable moods. I did not follow her when she went hunting; I waited until she brought the meat to the campfire. Sometimes, on mornings when she was silent and frowning, I was afraid to talk to her, afraid she might decide to leave me alone on the plains. But other times she seemed to welcome my company. Sometimes, I thought she liked me.

One night, when Nadia sniffed the air and said that a thunderstorm was coming, we put up her tent of heavy canvas. The rain came, with winds that shook the tent and drove water in through every seam. The prairie grasses whipped and danced in the high wind. Small rivers flowed down the tent's canvas sides. The lightning flashed, revealing the oxen standing with their heads down, soaked by the pelting rain. The thunder frightened me, but Nadia put her arm around my shoulders and laughed. "Frightened by the growling from the sky?" she said. "Don't be foolish." She sang me a lullaby in her own language. The chorus reminded me of wolves howling, a sound that was no longer frightening. I fell asleep to her singing.

I lost track of the days. There was a dreamy timeless quality to our travel. The scenery did not change as we traveled: one bend in the river looked much the same as the last. We passed landmarks that I had heard of: Court House Rock and Chimney Rock rose in the distance, unmistakable. Antelope bounded away from us. A herd of buffalo watched us pass. We saw no other wagons, and eventually, Nadia stopped talking about when we would find another wagon train. I thought she might have forgotten, and I was willing to forget with her.

As we rode, Nadia sometimes sang snatches of song in her native language. She taught me the lullaby she had sung the night of the storm. At the end of my first lesson, I could sing one verse, though my tongue tripped over the unfamiliar words and Nadia laughed at my pronunciation.

She translated for me. "Sleep well, little one. The moon is up and your father is hunting. Sleep well and be safe." And then the chorus of wolf howls.

Each night, the wolves came closer to our camp. In the twilight, when Nadia and I sat by our tiny campfire, they drifted among the oxen like the silent clouds that blew past the face of the moon. When I asked Nadia about them she just smiled. "They know me. They know they are welcome here."

"Aren't you afraid that they'll kill the oxen?" I asked.

"They're not hungry. Look at them. If they were hungry, they'd be off

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with the buffalo herds, not prowling around this tame meat." She leaned back, her face ruddy in the firelight and told me about how the wolves hunted the buffalo.

"What's the best smell you can imagine?" she asked me.

I hesitated. "My mama's bread, fresh from the oven."

"Imagine that smell, thick around you, a warm living scent that draws you near. That's what the buffalo smell like to the wolves. The smell calls to them." She inhaled deeply, as if she could smell buffalo on the wind. "The great herds cover the land—hundreds of dark-humped beasts. Their shaggy fur is dusty and they move as if they were part of the earth, the hills come alive." She fell silent, but I prompted her.

"What happens when the wolves see the buffalo?" I asked.

"The wolves test the herd, running at the buffalo. Some buffalo shift nervously, and a few start to trot away. The wolves run at them again, and some buffalo spook. When the herd begins to gallop, you can feel the earth trembling underfoot, trembling with excitement at the chase. One buffalo, maybe an old bull, falls behind the others, and the wolves nip at his heels, tear at his haunches, slash at his legs. Maybe he turns and makes a stand, facing the pack with his horns, trying to trample them beneath his hooves. The wolves circle behind him, nipping and tearing and dodging his kicks. Again, he runs, leaving splashes of hot blood behind in the grass. The warm smell of fresh blood fills the air."

She glanced down at me and laughed. She was in one of her happy moods. "Don't look so fearful, little one. I just wanted you to understand why the wolves have no interest in tame meat."

"How do you know so well how it is?" I asked her.

She smiled. "I know," she said. "I have been there."

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything.

As the days passed, my dress grew tattered and grimy. After struggling to find a way to ride while wearing it, I tore the skirt so that I could ride astraddle. My arms and legs were brown from the sun; my skin was rough from the constant wind. Nadia taught me to load and shoot my father's pistol. I had to hold it with both hands, and even then the kick made me stagger. I was proud the first time I managed to hit the boulder I was aiming at.

With each passing day, the moon grew thinner, wearing itself down to a half moon, a quarter moon. With the waning of the moon, Nadia grew restless. Twice that week, when a sound in the night woke me, I opened my eyes to see her silhouetted against the stars, gazing outward into the darkness. During the day, she said nothing of her late-night wakefulness. She wore her hat pulled low, but she could not hide the dark circles beneath her eyes. She would slump in her saddle. She no longer sang as we rode.

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We reached the fur-trading post known as Fort Laramie on July 9. Nadia stood beside the tall, clay-brick walls and shouted that we had supplies to trade. A Frenchman with hair as long as an Indian's opened the gate and let us into the central courtyard. Indians and traders, reclining at ease on the low roofs of the buildings within the walls, stared down on us. They ignored me, concentrating on Nadia. But after a few minutes, she lost her fascination and they returned to their gambling game. By the open doors of the buildings, squaws sat in the shade. Some of them were engaged in needlework, stitching moccasins or garments of buffalo hide. Everywhere, there were children: dark-faced and curious, most of them half-naked.

"Will we stay here tonight?" I asked Nadia.

"Here?" She looked up at the walls and wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something bad. "I'd as soon spend the night in prison."

She tied the horses and the mule to a post and told me to watch them. I sat in the shade nearby, while Nadia talked with the Frenchman. The children swarmed around me, and I glared at them, warning them away.

Nadia spoke enough French that I could barely follow the conversation. Negotiating the trade took a long time. Nadia praised the oxen and the goods they carried. The Frenchman said that the beasts looked sick. Some of the traders and Indians climbed down from the roof to join the discussion, surrounding Nadia and the Frenchman. At one point, Nadia started to lead the oxen away, shouting to me. "We'll do no business here. Come along, Sarah Ann." But then the Frenchman called her back and the circle of traders closed around her again. There was much shouting in French and English. A young Indian boy ran to and fro. First, he brought an odd assortment of bundles and bottles to the Frenchman. Then he ran away and returned, leading a small Indian pony.

Nadia called to me and beckoned me to join her among the traders and Indians. I did not like these men—they stared at me and smelled of tobacco and whiskey. But Nadia was there to protect me.

"Here now," she said, holding up a pair of buckskin trousers. She measured them against me. "They'll fit well enough, I reckon." She handed me a shirt and moccasins as well, and jerked her head toward the doorway where a squaw sat. "Go put them on."

In the darkened interior, under the watchful eyes of the squaw and her children, I tugged off my dress. The new clothes smelled of dust, and the shirt was far too large, but I tucked it into the pants.

I swaggered into the sunshine, happy to be wearing pants rather than a skirt. Nadia boosted me onto the pony's back. The beast shied and then steadied. I gripped it with my knees and clung to the buckskin strap that girdled its belly.

"Good enough," Nadia said to the Frenchman. The pony stood docilely,

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head hanging low in the afternoon heat, while Nadia loaded the other packages onto the back of the mule and the most docile of the oxen.

"The last wagon train through here was days ago," she said, as she tied the pack. "I don't think we can catch it."

"That's good," I said. At that moment, I did not want to catch a wagon train. I wanted to go on traveling with Nadia, singing her songs and riding on my pony by her side.

She glanced up at me, her expression unreadable. "What's this, little one? You don't want to travel with the white men?"

"I want to travel with you."

She wet her lips, staring up at me, then she looked away. "We'd best be going," she said. "Put some distance between us and this place before night." She swung up onto her horse, chirped to the animal, and started out the gate.

Though she had said nothing, I thought that she wanted me to stay. She was lonely too, I think. I took her silence as agreement and I was happy for the rest of that day.

That night, after I had wrapped myself in my blanket to sleep, I heard Nadia get up and go to the pack. In the darkness, I heard liquid splash into a tin cup. Then I caught a whiff of whiskey. Nadia sat alone by the ashes of the fire. I could not see her face in the darkness. She lifted the cup and drank.

The horses shifted and their harness jingled. I lay in my blanket, watching Nadia drink. After a time, I heard her pour another cup of whiskey. The moon hung just above the western horizon, a crescent of white as delicate and pale as the rim of a china cup. Nadia's hat shielded her face from its dim light. Her head was down, her shoulders bowed.

I sat up, but she took no notice. With my blanket wrapped around me, I went to sit beside her. She did not look at me.

"What's wrong, Nadia?" I asked her. I was afraid of her, just then. But she looked so mournful that I could not stay away.

She shrugged and shook her head. "I don't even like the taste of it," she said, her voice harsh. "But it will help me sleep."

I waited. She was halfway through the cup when she spoke again. "It's the moon," she said. "Wearing itself down to a splinter and leaving us in the darkness."

"It will get big again soon enough," I told her. It was as if I were the older of us two, comforting her in the darkness.

"It will," she said. "But the full moon is so far away. I can't wait so long." She drained the cup and poured another. "It was easier when my mother and father were with me."

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"What happened to your mother and father?" I asked her. "Where is your family?"

"Dead," she said. "Killed, every one of them." She looked up and met my eyes. "My father was shot when he was out hunting deer. In the thrill of the chase, he did not see the other hunter."

I shook my head. "Why would a hunter shoot him for chasing deer?"

"He didn't look like a man," she said softly. "A hunter would shoot a wolf for no reason at all. A wolf, he would just shoot for being a wolf. No reason." She leaned back, looking up at the sliver of a moon. "You know, I tracked the hunter and one day, I shot him. Just like that. I told him that I was killing him for my father's death, and he didn't understand. He didn't understand at all."

"My mother and I headed west. But after my father's death, I don't think my mother cared if she went on living. She grew careless. Not so long after my father's death, she was caught in a trap. The steel jaws closed on her leg, breaking the bone and holding her fast. She might have escaped at dawn, but the trapper walked his line before the sun came up. He found her there and shot her. I killed him too, shot him through the heart early the next day. But my mother was gone."

Nadia did not look at me. "I've been careless, too." She held up her maimed hand. "I was lucky. The trap was old; its spring was weak. It did not break my leg, just caught and held it. I managed to pull free of it. I lost a few fingers, but I survived." Her voice was flat and even.

I watched her, not speaking, scarcely breathing. Her eyes were focused on the cup in her hands.

"Do you understand, Sarah Ann?"

I nodded, afraid to trust my voice.

She glanced at my face. "My parents brought me to this country when I was just a child. My mother used to tell me about the old country. The villages were so close together; the wild animals had long since fled. My family lived on the edge, between the village and the wild lands, part of both. As the wild lands went away, there was no space for us, no space at all. There, people blamed the wolves for killing sheep."

She waved a hand at the horizon. "Here, there is space. But still men kill wolves. They say wolves are vicious; wolves are dangerous. Always the men who say these things are vicious men, dangerous men, men who like to kill." She shook her head and drained her cup of whiskey. "Go to sleep, little one. You can do nothing for me."

I reached out and touched her hand. "We can be sisters. We'll be family to each other. Don't be sad."

For a time, we sat together. I woke in the daylight with my blanket tucked around me. Nadia had built a fire and was heating water in the

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kettle. She said nothing of our late night conversation, and I did not mention it either.

Each night after that, when I was wrapped in my blanket, she rose from her bed and drank. Some nights, she paced away from the camp, wandering out into the darkness. I worried about her, but I dared not follow.

The moon grew larger, but Nadia's restlessness did not fade. If anything, it increased: a nervous excitement that seemed somehow unhealthy. On the evening when the moon would be full, we made camp early. She claimed she was hungry, but I noticed that she ate little, barely touching the stew or the biscuits. Well before our usual hour, when the sun was just down, she lay down and suggested I do the same. Tired as always from the day's journey, I dozed off.

When I woke, Nadia was no longer beside me. The fire had burned to embers and the moon illuminated the prairie with its cold white light. Nadia's shirt and trousers and boots and hat had been neatly placed on her blanket.

I sat up and looked around. Our horses stood motionless a few feet away. "Nadia?" I said. There was no answer. "Nadia?" This time, my voice was touched with panic.

I shook off my blanket and walked to the river bluff. I could hear the placid murmur of the water and the creaking of frogs on its bank. No human sound disturbed the silence. The night wind raised ripples on the smooth water.

I returned to camp and poked the fire until it flared, the flames licking at the dry grass that I piled on the embers. With my blanket wrapped around my shoulders, I kept watch, holding my father's pistol in my lap. I don't know what I had expected. I suppose I expected that somehow Nadia would take me with her when she went hunting. It was too much to be left alone again. I cried a little, worrying that she would not come back, she would never come back. I must have drowsed then, my eyes closing of their own accord.

I woke suddenly and saw Nadia, silhouetted against the dawn glow in the eastern sky. She was naked. Her body was sturdy and square-shouldered. I could see her muscles moving beneath her skin as she strode through the grass.

Unconcerned with her nakedness, she stopped by her blanket and stretched, reaching up to the sky. When she saw me watching her, she smiled down at me, amused by something I could not understand. "It was a fine night for hunting," she said. "You look fierce, little one. Have you been sitting up with a pistol all night?"

"I woke up and you were gone," I said.

Her smile faded then, and she squatted in front of me and took my

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chin in her hand. "When the moon is full, I go hunting," she said. "I thought you understood that." She studied my face and for a moment, I was afraid of her. She let me go, and then reluctantly pulled on her trousers and shirt.

"We'll spend a few days here," she told me. Without another word, she wrapped herself in her blanket, pulled her hat low over her eyes, and went to sleep.

I could not go back to sleep. I got up, went away from the camp, and scrambled down the bank to the shore of the river. On the muddy bank, I noticed footprints: my prints from the day before. Crossing my prints were pawprints: the track of a wolf. The animal's right front paw was missing two toes.

I sat on the river bank for a while, watching the frogs that lived in the slow eddies by the river's edge. If I sat still, the frogs forgot that I was there and came swimming to sit on the muddy shore. But if I turned my head or moved to scratch an itch, they all fled, leaping for the safety of the water. Each escaping frog left rings of spreading ripples. The ripple patterns intersected, making an intricate design, like elaborate lacework.

I was sitting very still when all the frogs jumped at once. Nadia came up behind me and sat beside me on the muddy bank. She didn't speak at first. I didn't look at her.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

I nodded, my eyes on the spreading ripples. For a long time, she didn't say anything else. I glanced up at her. She was staring at her hands.

I reached out and took her crippled hand. "It's all right," I said.

We sat together on the bank, and after a time, the frogs came back.

We spent three days by the river. On the fourth day, when we set out on our journey again, Nadia was singing and happy. The trail left the riverside and gradually climbed to the South Pass that led through the Rocky Mountains. We reached the northern end of the Colorado Valley in early August. It took several days for us to cross the valley; many of the springs and waterholes there were dangerous. Nadia sniffed the air near each one. Sometimes, she insisted we keep moving, looking for safer water and feed for the horses. Often, we didn't make camp until well after dark.

But I did not mind that. Nadia and I sat by the campfire and looked up at the stars, howled and listened to wolves answer. I thought I would be with her forever. I had never had a sister, but surely we were sisters. There was nothing we couldn't do together.

We crossed the ridge that divided the Colorado Valley from the Great Salt Lake Basin. My sure-footed pony made his way along the winding trail, and I was grateful that we had left the wagon behind. On clear

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days, I could see snow on the peaks high above us. It was a wild and unforgiving place, and I loved it.

At least, by day I loved it. At night, after the campfire had burned low, I felt lonely again. I thought about my mother and my father and I wept, trying to sob quietly. Once, Nadia woke up and heard me crying. She rocked me in her arms and sang me the lullaby of the wolves until I slept again.

"Sarah Ann," she asked me the next morning. "Why do you cry at night?"

I ducked my head, embarrassed that she had mentioned my tears, which I regarded as a foolish weakness. "I guess I just miss my mama," I said.

She studied me thoughtfully. "You miss your people."

"Only sometimes," I said quickly. "Only at night."

"I miss my people, too," she said. "I understand."

As we rode over the pass, Nadia taught me another song in her language, this one about a woman and a man who fell in love. The woman, the song said, had "wild blood," and the man did not. In the end, she left him behind, even though she loved him. I remember the chorus, where the woman sang to her lover: "Leave me now, for I must wander. I have no place to call my home." I didn't like this one as well as I liked the lullaby. The melody was plaintive.

I asked Nadia why the woman left the man, even though she loved him. She shrugged, looking sad. "That is the way of things," she said. "They were not of the same people."

"I don't think that's the way things have to be," I said. "Couldn't she change? Couldn't she change him?"

She shook her head. "There's no changing the way things are."

In the Great Salt Lake Valley, Nadia sniffed the wind and led the way to a spring where hot water bubbled from the ground. There, we washed away the grime of the trail, repeatedly filling the kettle with steaming water and pouring it over each other's heads. We scrubbed ourselves with handfuls of grass and I felt clean for the first time in more than a month.

The next day, I saw the Great Salt Lake far below. Its waters glittered in the light of the setting sun. Behind it, the mountains rose up; in front were the houses and gardens of a small city. "One day's travel," Nadia said, reining her horse in beside me.

After the days and nights of solitude, the city by the lake was overwhelming. Too many people; too many houses. A Mormon woman looked up from her vegetable garden to watch us pass, her eyes lingering on Nadia's trousers. Nadia asked her where the wagon companies camped, and the woman pointed to the west side of town.

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I rode close by Nadia's side, following her to the place where the wagons camped. As we rode past a wagon encampment, I could see a family like my own. The mother was shelling peas for their dinner, doubtless the first fresh vegetables they had eaten for many weeks. A little girl played at her feet with a rag doll. A girl my own age watched me from her mother's side. Beneath the brim of her sunbonnet, I could see her eyes. She gawked at me and my pony as if we were a circus curiosity.

I dug my heels into my pony's sides and caught up with Nadia. She glanced at my face. "What's wrong?" she asked me.

"Nothing's wrong," I said. "Just the sun in my eyes." I wiped a few tears away and would not look at her.

We camped not far away. The moon was just a sliver in the sky, and Nadia drank whiskey with dinner. She did not talk much. I did not try to draw her out. Soothed by the whiskey, she fell asleep by the fire.

For a time, I sat by the fire, looking up at the stars. In the distance, I heard music: not the howling of wolves, but the homey sound of a harmonica. I recognized the tune as one that my father used to play. As I listened, voices raised in song joined the harmonica music.

I crept away from the fire and made my way to the outskirts of the circle of wagons. I stood beside one of the wagons, where I could watch and listen. The firelight shone on the faces of the travelers. The woman who had been shelling peas sat in the firelight with a child in her lap, singing with the others.

I was so caught up in the music that I did not hear the girl until she was right beside me.

"Hello," she said. "What are you doing here?"

I took a step back, startled. "Just watching."

"My name's Mary. What's yours?"

"Sarah Ann."

She looked me up and down. "How come you're dressed like a boy?"

"It's easier to ride like this."

She shook her head, not accepting the explanation. "Is that your mama, riding with you?"

I shook my head. "My mama's dead," I said, and the words stuck in my throat.

The girl looked thoughtful. "Where's your papa?"

"He's dead too. They died of fever."

"Mary?" The woman from the fireside was coming our way. I shrank back into the shadows, strangely fearful. "Who is that you're talking to?"

"Sarah Ann," Mary said.

The woman came close to us. Something about her—her smell, the rustle of her skirts, the way she carried herself—something reminded me of my mother.

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"I was just listening to the music, ma'am," I managed to say.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to hear music, child," the woman said. "There now, what's wrong?" She stooped down and put one arm around my shoulders. "What is it, child?"

"She's an orphan," Mary announced matter-of-factly.

"There now," Mary's mother said. "There now." She patted my back and had Mary fetch a clean handkerchief from the wagon. The handkerchief's strong scent of laundry soap reminded me of home and made the tears flow afresh. She rocked me in her arms and I told her how my father had died and my mother had died. I told her about traveling with Nadia, about trading at Fort Laramie.

I did not know that I was making a choice. I did not intend to make a choice. I had been happy in the mountains with Nadia. But the music of the harmonica lured me close.

Mary's mother soothed and comforted me. "You should stay with us tonight," she said. "You can sleep here with Mary." She wiped my face clean with the handkerchief and put me and Mary to bed. It was comforting to sleep in a wagon again. But I did not understand that I was making a choice. I thought I would wake early the next day and hurry back to Nadia.

The next morning, when the first light of dawn touched the wagon's canvas sides, I slipped from bed and climbed out of the wagon. My pony was picketed beside the wagon. The pack that held my things was on the ground beside the pony. I looked at these things for a moment, without understanding. Then I ran to the camp where I had left Nadia. The camp was empty; the fire was cold. She had left before dawn, packing my belongings and leaving them beside the wagon.

Mary's mother and father took me with them to California. They were good people, generous people, though they took away my trousers and made me wear a sunbonnet and a dress. When we reached California, they found my uncle. He and his wife adopted me as their own daughter. I came to call my uncle "papa" and his wife "mama." But I never forgot how to shoot and sometimes, when I could get away with it, I rode my pony astride, like a boy.

Eventually, I married. I had children of my own. When I was a young mother, I sometimes amused my babies by howling and letting the wolves answer. If there were wolves, they always answered. They knew that I was calling out in loneliness, and they always replied.

Over the years, I wondered what happened to Nadia. Now that I am older, I understand better why she left me. She could not take the responsibility for taking a child who lacked the wild blood. She did not want to ruin my life. But she did not know that the seeds of wildness had already taken root. Though I tried to fit into my uncle's family, I

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never felt comfortable. I had grown too big for the space allotted me. It was as if I were caught between the wild lands and the village, belonging to neither.

But all this was long ago. My husband and I live in town now. The surrounding land has been plowed for farming. I do not howl, and if I did, the wolves would not answer. There are no wolves here now. ●

NEXT ISSUE

New writer **Mary Rosenblum** returns to these pages next month with our powerful March cover story, "Water Bringer." The scene is the American West, but not the familiar West that we know—for Rosenblum takes us instead to a near (and all too probable) future West, a West where the water has finally and irrevocably run out, the aquifers and watertables have run dry, and deserts have eaten the former farms and towns and ranches of Oregon and Washington and Montana and New Mexico... and against the bleak background of the Drylands, she spins a stark but poignant story of human hopes and fears, of love and betrayal and the power of dreams, one that you will not soon forget. **Janet Kagan** whose story "The Loch Moose Monster" won last year's Readers' Award poll in a landslide—is also on hand for March with a new Mama Jason story, taking us back to the strange planet Mirabile to unravel a deadly biological mystery, and demonstrate the unexpected dangers of "Raising Cane."

ALSO IN MARCH: Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** returns with a prequel to his popular "Kirinyaga" series, taking us back to the days *before* Koriba emigrated to his orbiting Utopian space colony, for a sharp look at the events that took place on "One Perfect Morning, With Jackals"; new British writer **Ian R. MacLeod** then takes us to one of the strangest and most original fantasy worlds you've ever seen *any*where, a world bleak and Dickensian and darkly beautiful, a world created and maintained by "The Giving Mouth"; **Charles Sheffield** whips us along with him to the most remote and exotic corners of the Earth, on a fast-paced hunt for "Fat Man's Gold"; recent Campbell Award-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** returns to take us "Waltzing on a Dancer's Grave," and in the process tells us a chilling and evocative ghost story as well; and new writer **Kathleen J. Alcalá** introduces us to a small-town girl who is troubled by strange and unquiet dreams, in the haunting "Sweetheart." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on February 5, 1991.

COMING SOON: Big new novellas by **Nancy Kress, Mike Resnick, Tony Daniel, Thomas Wylde,** and **Garcia y Robertson,** plus new stories by **Isaac Asimov, Kim Stanley Robinson, Michael Bishop, Tanith Lee, Keith Roberts, Eileen Gunn,** and many others.

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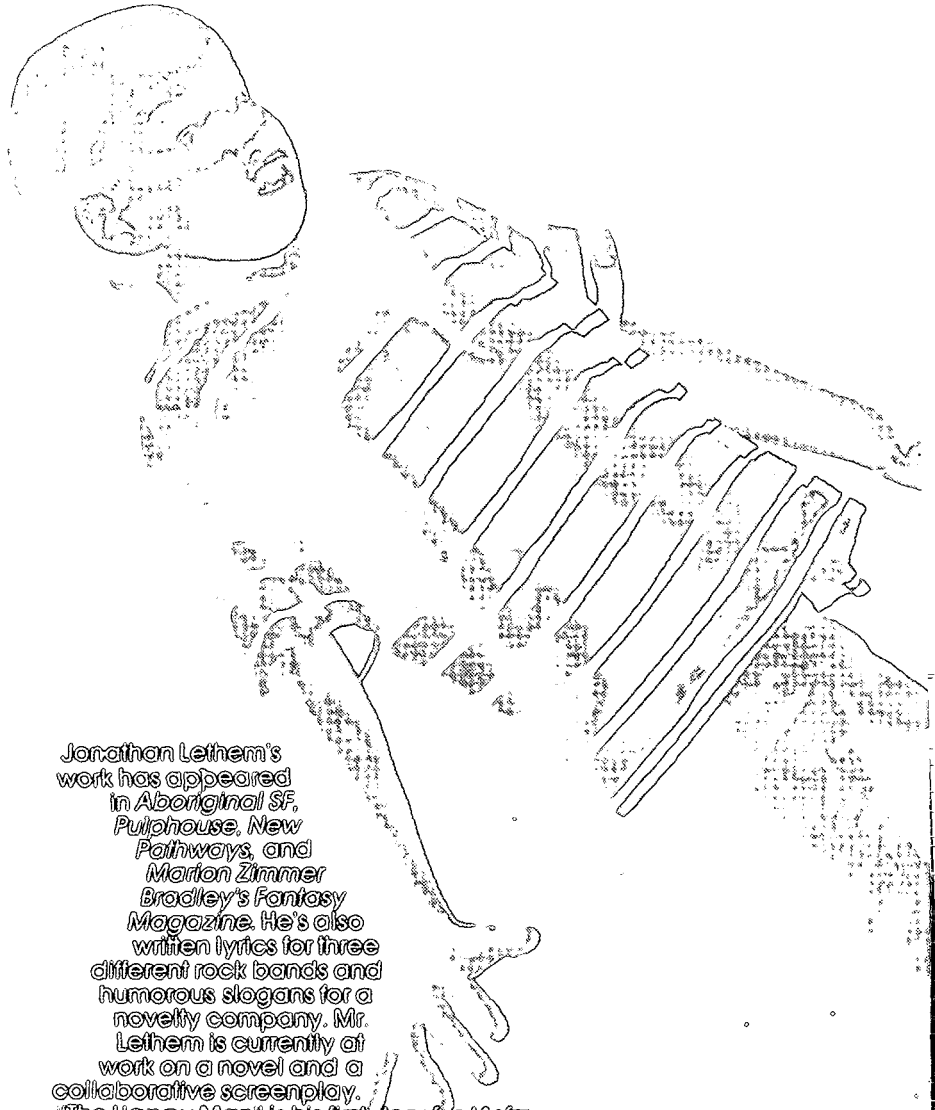

Jonathan Lethem's work has appeared in *Aboriginal SF*, *Pulphouse*, *New Pathways*, and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*. He's also written lyrics for three different rock bands and humorous slogans for a novelty company. Mr. Lethem is currently at work on a novel and a collaborative screenplay. "The Happy Man" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

A word of warning. Brief scenes in this story may be disquieting to some.

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Art Direction Steinmetz

THE HAPPY MAN

by Jonathan Lethem

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I left her in the bedroom, and went and poured myself a drink. I felt it now; there wasn't any doubt. But I didn't want to tell her, not yet. I wanted to stretch it out for as long as I could. It had been so quick, this time.

In the meantime I wanted to see the kid.

I took my drink and went into his room and sat down on the edge of his bed. His night light was on; I could see I'd woken him. Maybe he'd heard me clinking bottles. Maybe he'd heard us making love. Anyway, he was awake when I came in.

"Dad," he said.

"Peter."

"Something the matter?"

Peter was twelve. A good kid, a very good kid. He was just eleven when I died. All computers and stereo, back then. Heavy metal and D and D. Sorcerors, Dragons, the flaming pits of Hell, the whole bit. And music to match. After I died and came back he got real serious about things, forgot about the rock music and the imaginary Hells. Gave up his friends, too. I was pretty worried about that, and we had a lot of big talks. But he stayed serious. The one thing he stuck with was the computer, only now he used it to map out real Hell. My Hell.

Instead of answering his question I took another drink. He knew what was the matter.

"You going away?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Tell Mom yet?"

"Nope."

He scooted up until he was sitting on his pillow. I could see him thinking: *It was fast this time, Dad. Is it getting faster?* But he didn't say anything.

"Me and your mother," I said. "There's a lot of stuff we didn't get to, this time."

Peter nodded.

"Well—" I began, then stopped. What did he understand? More than I guessed, probably. "Take good care of her," I said.

"Yeah."

I kissed his forehead. I knew how much he hated the smell of liquor, but he managed not to make a face. Good kid, etc.

Then I went in to see his mother.

It was while we were making love that I'd had the first inkling that the change was coming on, but I'd kept it to myself. There wasn't any

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purpose to ruining the mood; besides, I wasn't sure yet. It wasn't until afterward that I knew for sure.

But I had to tell her now. Another hour or so and I'd be gone.

I sat on the edge of the bed, just like with Peter. Only in this room it was dark. And she wasn't awake. I put my hand on her cheek, felt her breath against my palm. She murmured, and kissed my hand. I squeezed her shoulder until she figured out that I wanted her to wake up.

"Maureen," I said.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

I wanted to undress again and get back under the covers. Curl myself around her and fall asleep. Not to say another word. Instead I said: "I'm going back."

"Going back?" Her voice was suddenly hoarse.

I nodded in the dark, but she got the idea.

"Damn you!"

I didn't see the slap coming. That didn't matter, since it wasn't for show. It rattled my teeth. By the time I recovered she was up against the headboard, curled into herself, sobbing weakly.

It wasn't usually this bad for her anymore. She'd numbed the part of herself that felt it the most. But it didn't usually happen this fast, either.

I moved up beside her on the bed, and cradled her head in my hands. Let her cry a while against my chest. But she wasn't done yet. When she turned her face up it was still raw and contorted with her pain, tendons standing out on her neck.

"Don't say it like that," she gasped out between sobs. "I hate that so much—"

"What?" I tried to say it softly.

"Going 'back.' Like that's more real to you now, like that's where you belong, and this is the mistake, the exception—"

I couldn't think of what to say to stop her.

"—oh, God." I held her while she cried some more. "Just don't say it like that, Tom," she said when she could. "I can't stand it."

"I won't say it like that anymore," I said flatly.

She calmed somewhat. We sat still there in the dark, my arms around her.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while. She was still crying, but evenly now. "It's just so fast. Are you sure—"

"Yeah," I said.

"We hardly had any time," she said, sniffling. "I mean, I was just getting the feeling back, you know? When we were making love. It was so good, just now. Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

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"I just thought it was the beginning of a good period again. I thought you'd be back for a while . . ."

I stroked her hair, not saying anything.

"Did you know when we were fucking?" she asked.

"No," I lied. "Not until after."

"I don't know if I can take it anymore, Tom. I can't watch you walk around like a zombie all the time. It's driving me crazy. Every day I look in your eyes, thinking *maybe he's back*; maybe he's about to come back, and you just stare at me. I try to hold your hand in the bed and then you need to scratch yourself or something and you just pull away without saying anything, like you didn't even notice. I can't live like this—"

"I'm sorry," I said, a little hollowly. I wasn't unsympathetic. But we'd been through it before. We always ended in the same place. We always would.

And frankly, once I'd absorbed the impact of her rage, the conversation lost its flavor. My thoughts were beginning to drift ahead, to Hell.

"Maybe you should live somewhere else," she said. "Your body, I mean. When you're not around. You could sleep down at the station or something."

"You know I can't do that."

"Oh no," she said. "I just remembered—"

"What?"

"Your uncle Frank, remember? When does he come?"

"Maybe I'll be back already before he shows up," I said. It wasn't likely. I usually spent a week or so in Hell, when I went. Frank was due in four days. "Anyway, he knows about me. There won't be any problem."

She sighed. "I just hate having guests when you're gone—"

"Frank's not a guest," I said. "He's family."

She changed the subject. "Did you forget the medication? Maybe if you took the medication—"

"I always take it," I said. "It doesn't work. It doesn't keep me here. You can't take a pill to keep your soul from migrating to Hell."

"It's supposed to help, Tom."

"Well it doesn't matter, does it? I take it. Why do we have to talk about it?"

Now I'd hurt her a little. We were quiet. I felt her composing herself there, in my arms. Making her peace with my going away. Numbing herself.

The result was that we came a little closer together. I was able to share in her calm. We would be nice to each other from here on in. Things were back to normal.

But at the same time, we'd backed away from that perilous, agonized place where to be separated by this, or separated at all, even for a minute,

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was too much to bear; from that place where all that mattered was our love, and where compromise was fundamentally wrong.

Normal was sometimes miles apart.

"You know what I hate the most?" she said. "That I don't even want to stay up with you. You'll only be around for what? A couple of hours more? I should want to get in every last minute. But I don't know what to say to you, really. There's nothing new to say about it. I feel like going to sleep."

"It's coming fast," I said, just to set her straight. "I think it's more like half an hour now."

"Oh," she said.

"But no hard feelings. Go to sleep. I understand."

"I have to," she said. "I have to get up in the morning. I feel sick from crying." She slid under the covers and hugged me at the waist. "Tom?" she said, in a smaller voice.

"Maureen."

"Is it getting faster?"

"It's just this one time," I said. "It probably doesn't mean anything. It's just painful to go through—"

"Okay," she said. "I love you, Tom."

"I love you too," I said. "Don't worry."

She went to sleep then, while I lay awake beside her, waiting to cross over.

If Maureen hadn't still been in school when I died that would have been the end of it. If she hadn't been in debt up to her ears, and still two years away from setting up an office. As it was I had to sit in cold pack for three months while her lawyer pushed her application through. Eventually the courts saw it her way: I was the breadwinner. So they thawed me out.

Now she was supposed to be happy. I kept food on the table, and she had her graduate degree. Her son grew up knowing his dad. It wasn't supposed to matter that my soul shuttled between my living body here on earth, and Hell. She wasn't supposed to complain about that.

Besides, it wasn't my fault.

2.

In Hell I'm a small boy.

Younger than Peter. Eight or nine, I'd guess.

I always start in the same place. The beginning is always the same. I'm at that table, in that damned garden, waiting for the witch.

Let me be more specific. I begin as a detail in a tableau: four of us

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children are seated in a semi-circle around a black cast-iron garden table. We sit in matching iron chairs. The lawn beneath us is freshly mowed; the gardener, if there is one, permits dandelions but not crabgrass. At the edge of the lawn is a scrubby border of rosebushes. Beyond that, a forest.

Behind me, when I turn to look, there's a pair of awkward birch saplings. Behind them, the witch's house. Smoke tumbles out of the slate chimney. The witch is supposed to be making us breakfast.

We're supposed to wait. Quietly.

Time is a little slow there, at Hell's entrance. I've waited there with the other children, bickering, playing with the silverware, curling the lace doily under my setting into a tight coil, for what seems like years. Breakfast is never served. Never. The sun, which is hanging just beyond the tops of the trees, never sets. Time stands still there. Which is not to say we sit frozen like statues. Far from it. We're a bunch of hungry children, and we make all kinds of trouble.

But I'm leaving something out.

We sit in a semi-circle. That's to make room for the witch's horse. The witch's horse takes up a quarter of the table. He's seated in front of a place like any other guest.

He's waiting for breakfast, too.

The witch's horse is disgusting. The veins under his eyes quiver as he squirms in his seat. His forelegs are chained and staked to keep him at the table. He's sitting on his tail, so he can't swat away the flies which gather and drink at the corners of his mouth. The witch's horse is wearing a rusted pair of cast-iron eyeglass-frames on his nose. They're for show, I guess, but they don't fit right. They chafe a pair of raw pink gutters into the sides of his nose.

If I stay at the table and wait for breakfast, subtle changes do occur. Most often the other children get restless, and begin to argue or play, and the table is jostled, and the silverware clatters, and the horse snorts in fear, his yellow eyes leaking. Sometimes a snake or a fox slithers across the lawn and frightens the horse, and he rattles his chains, and the children murmur and giggle. Once a bird flew overhead and splattered oily white birdshit onto the teapot. It was a welcome distraction, like anything else.

Every once in a while the children decide to feel sorry for the horse, and mount a campaign to lure him forward and pluck the glasses from his nose, or daub at his gashes with a wadded-up doily. I tried to help them once, when I was new to Hell. I felt sorry for the horse, too. That was before I saw him and the witch ride together in the forest. When I saw them ride I knew the horse and the witch were in it together.

Seeing them ride, howling and grunting through the trees, is one of

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the worst things I experience in all of Hell. After the first time I didn't feel sorry for the horse at all.

Whatever the cause, disturbances at the garden table are always resolved the same way. The activity reaches some pitch, the table seems about to overturn, when suddenly there's a sound at the door of the witch's house. We all freeze in our places, breath held. Even the horse knows to sit stock still, and the only sound that remains is the buzzing of the flies.

We all watch for movement at the door of the witch's house. On the slim hope that maybe, just this once, it's breakfast time. The door opens, just a crack, just enough, and the witch slips out. She's smiling. She's very beautiful, the witch. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen, actually. She's got a great smile. The witch walks out across the lawn, and stops halfway between her door and the table. By now we're all slumped obediently in our seats again. My heart, to be honest, is in my throat.

I'm in love.

"Breakfast will be ready soon," sings the witch. "So just sit quietly, don't bother horse, and before you know it I'll have something delicious on the table—"

And then she turns and slips back through her doorway and we start all over again.

That's how Hell begins. Maybe if I were a little more patient—waited, say, a thousand years, instead of just a hundred—breakfast would appear. But then, knowing Hell, I'm not sure I'd want to see what the witch has been cooking up all this time.

But I don't wait at all anymore. I get up and walk away from the table right away.

Time in Hell doesn't start until you get up from the garden table.

3.

The Hell in the computer starts out the same way mine does: in the garden.

Peter laid it all out like Dungeons and Dragons, like a role-playing computer game. We entered a long description of the scene; the other children, the witch's horse, the witch. It was Peter's idea, when I came back with my first tentative reports of what I'd gone through, to map it out with the computer. I think he had the idea that it was like one of his dungeons, and that if we persisted we would eventually find a way out. . . .

So Peter's "Dad" character wakes up at the garden table, same as I do.

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And when Peter types in a command, like GET UP FROM THE TABLE, WALK NORTH ACROSS THE LAWN, his "Dad" goes to explore a computer version of the Hell I inhabit.

I don't soft-pedal it. I report what I see, and he enters it into the computer. Factually, we're recreating my Hell. The only thing I spare him are my emotional responses. I omit my fear at what I encounter, my rage at living these moments again and again, my unconscionable lust for the witch. . . .

4.

When I crossed over that night, after fighting with Maureen, I didn't dawdle at the garden table. I was bored with that by now. I pushed my chair back and started in the direction Peter and I call "North"; the opposite direction from the witch's house. I ran on my eight-year-old legs across the lawn, through a gap in the border of rosebushes, and into the edge of the forest.

The north was my favored direction at the moment, because I'd explored it the least. Oh, Hell goes on forever in every direction, of course. But I don't always get that far. I explored the territories nearest the witch's garden most thoroughly, in any direction; as I get farther out it gets less and less familiar. I just don't always get very far out.

And the nearby territories to the north just seemed less *hackneyed* to me at the moment.

The forest to the north quickly gives way to an open field. It's called the Field of Tubers, because of the knuckled roots that grow there. Sort of like carrots, or potatoes, or knees. Like carrots in that they're orange, like potatoes in the way the vines link them all together, under the ground. Like knees, or elbows, in the way they twitch, and bleed when you kick them.

The first few times I came to the Field of Tubers I tried to run across. Now I walk, slowly, carefully. That way I avoid falling into the breeding holes. The holes don't look like much if you don't step on them; just little circular holes, like wet anthills in the dirt. They throb a little. But if your foot lands on them they gape open, the entrance stretching like a mouth, and you fall in.

The breeding holes are about four feet deep, and muddy. Inside, the newborn tubers writhe in heaps. They're not old enough to take root yet. It's a mess.

Sure, you can run across the field, scrambling back out of the breeding holes, scraping the crushed tubers off the bottom of your shoes. You get

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to the other side of the field either way. It's not important. Myself, I walk.

Time, which is frozen at the witch's breakfast table, starts moving once I pass through the forest. But time in Hell takes a very predictable course. The sun, which has been sitting at the top of the trees, refusing to set, goes down as I cross the Field of Tubers. It's night when I reach the other side, no matter how long it takes me to cross. If I run, looking back over my shoulder, I can watch the sun plummet through the treetops and disappear. Of course, if I run looking back over my shoulder I trip over the tubers and fall into the breeding holes, constantly. If I dawdle in the field, squatting at the edge of a breeding hole, poking it with my finger to watch it spasm open, the sun refuses to set.

But why would I ever want to do that?

5.

When I first came back, when they warmed me up and put me back together, they didn't send me home right away. I had to spend a week in an observation ward, and on the fourth day they sent a doctor in to let me know where I stood.

"You'll be fine," he said. "You won't have any trouble holding down your job. Most people won't know the difference. But you will cross over."

"I've heard," I said.

"It shouldn't affect your public life," he said. "You'll be able to carry on most conversations in a perfunctory way. You just won't seem very interested in personal questions. Your mind will appear to be wandering. And you won't be very affectionate. Your co-workers won't notice, but your wife will."

"I won't want to fuck her," I said.

"No, you won't."

"Okay," I said. "How often will I go?"

"That varies from person to person. Some get lucky, and cross over just once or twice for the rest of their lives. It's rare, but it does happen. At the other extreme, some spend most of their time over there. For most, it's somewhere in between."

"You're not saying anything."

"That's right; I'm not. But I should say that how often you cross over isn't always as important as how you handle it. The stress of not knowing is as bad or worse than actually going through it. The anticipation. It can cast a pall over the times when you're back. A lot of marriages . . . don't survive the resurrection."

"And there's no way to change it."

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"Not really. You'll get a prescription for Valizax. It's a hormone that stimulates the secretions of a gland associated, in some studies, with the migration. Some people claim it helps, and maybe it does, in their cases. Or maybe it's just a placebo effect. And then there's therapy."

"Therapy?"

"They'll give you the brochure when you leave. There are several support groups for migrators. Some better than others. We recommend one in particular. It's grounded in solid psychoanalytic theory, and like the drug, some people have said it improves the condition. But that's not for me to say."

I went to the support group. The good one. Once. I don't know what I was expecting. There were seven or eight people there that night, and a group counselor who I learned wasn't resurrected, had never made the trips back and forth from his own Hell. After some coffee and uneasy socializing we went and sat in a circle. They went around, bringing each other up to date on their progress, and the counselor handed out brownie points for every little epiphany. When they got to me they wanted to hear about my Hell.

Only they didn't call it Hell. They called it a "psychic landscape." And I quickly learned that they wanted me to consider it symbolic. The counselor wanted me to explain what my Hell *meant*.

I managed to contain my anger, but I left at the first break.

Hell doesn't *mean* anything. Excuse me—*my* Hell doesn't mean anything. Maybe yours does.

But mine doesn't. That's what makes it Hell.

And it's not symbolic. It's very, very real.

6.

On the other side of the Field of Tubers, if I go straight over the crest, is the grove of the robot maker. A dense patch of trees nestled at the base of a hill.

The moon is up by this time.

The robot maker is an old man. A tired old man. He putters around in the grove in a welder's helmet, but he never welds. His robots are put together with wire and tinsnips. They're mostly pathetic. Half of them barely make it up to the combat pavilion before collapsing. He made better ones, once, if you believe him. He's badly in need of a young apprentice.

That's where I come in.

"Boy, you're here," he says when I arrive. He hands me a pliers or a ball peen hammer. "Let me show what I'm working on," he says. "I'll let

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you help." He tries to involve me in his current project, whatever it is. Whatever heap of refuse he's currently animating.

His problem, which he describes to me at length, is that his proudest creation, Colonel Eagery, went renegade on his way up to the battle pavilion. Back when the robot maker was young and strong, and built robots with fantastic capabilities, Colonel Eagery, he says, was his triumph, but the triumph went sour. The robot rebelled, and set up shop on the far side of the mountains, building evil counterparts to the robot maker's creations. The strong, evil robots that so routinely demolish the robot maker's own robots out on the battle pavilion.

I have two problems with this story.

First of all, I know Colonel Eagery, and he isn't a robot. Oh no. I know all too well that Eagery, who I also call the Happy Man, is flesh and blood.

The second is that the robot maker is too old and feeble for me to imagine that he's ever been able to build anything capable and effective at all, let alone something as capable and effective as I know Eagery to be.

Besides, Hell doesn't have a *before*. Hell is stuck in time, repeating endlessly. Hell doesn't have a past. It just *is*. The robot maker is always old and ineffectual, and he always has been.

But I never say this. My role is just as predetermined as the robot maker's. I humor him. When I'm passing through this part of Hell I'm the robot maker's apprentice. I make a show of interest in his latest project. I help him steer it up to the combat pavilion. I can't say why. That's just the way things are in this corner of Hell.

This time, when I entered the grove, I found the robot maker already heading up toward the pavilion. He'd built a little robot terrier this time. It was surprisingly mobile and lively, yipping and snapping at the robot maker's heels. I fell in with them, and the robot maker put his heavy, dry hand on my shoulder. The mechanical terrier sniffed at my shoes and barked once, then ran ahead, rooting frantically in the moss.

"He's a good one, boy," said the robot maker. "I think he's got a bit of your spark in him. This one's got a fighting chance against whatever the Colonel's cooked up."

It didn't, of course. I couldn't bring myself to look at the poor little mechanical terrier. It was about to be killed. But I didn't say anything.

At this point in our hike through the grove the witch and the witch's horse ride by. It's another dependable part of my clockwork Hell. They turn up at about this point in my journey—the moon just up, a breeze stirring—whichever direction I choose. It's a horrible sight, but it's one I've gotten used to. Like just about everything else.

The horse is a lot more imposing freed from his stakes at the table.

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He's huge and sweaty and hairy, his nostrils dilated wide, his lips curled back. He's not wearing those funny glasses anymore. The witch rides him cowboy style, bareback. She bends her head down and grunts exhortations into the horse's ear. She's still beautiful, I guess. And I still love her—sort of. I feel mixed up about the witch when she rides, actually. A combination of fear and pity and shame. An odd sense that she wouldn't do it if she didn't somehow *have* to. That the horse is somehow doing it to her.

But mostly I'm just afraid. As they rode through the grove now I stood frozen in place with fear, just like the first time.

The robot maker did what he always does: covered my eyes with his bony hand and muttered, "Terrible, terrible! Not in front of the boy!"

I peered through his fingertips, compelled to watch.

And then they were gone, snorting away into the night, and we were alone in the grove again. The terrier yipped after them angrily. The robot maker shook his head, gripped my shoulder, and we walked on.

The pavilion sits on a plateau at the edge of the woods. The base is covered with trees, invisible until you're there. The battle area, up on top, is like a ruined Greek temple. The shattered remains of the original roof are piled around the edges. The pavilion itself is littered with the glowing, radioactive shambles of the robot maker's wrecked creations. The pavilion is so infused with radiation that normal physics don't apply there; some of the ancient robots still flicker back into flame when the wind picks up, and sometimes one of the wrecks goes into an accelerated decline and withers into ashes, as though years of entropy have finally caught up with it. The carcasses tell the story of the robot maker's decline; his recent robots are less ambitious and formidable, and their husks are correspondingly more pathetic. Many of the newer ones simply failed on their way up to the pavilion; their ruined bodies litter the pathway up the hill.

But not the terrier. He bounded up the hill ahead of us, reached the crest, and disappeared over the top. The robot maker and I hurried after him, not wanting him to lose his match before we'd even seen what he was fighting.

His opponent was a wolfman robot. Like from an old horror movie, its face more human than dog. It was a perfect example of how the robot maker's creations were so badly overmatched: what chance does a house pet have against a wolfman? It was often like this, a question of several degrees of sophistication.

Standing on two feet, the wolfman towered over the terrier. It spoke too, taunting the little dog, who could only yip and growl in response.

"Here, boy," cackled the wolfman. "Come on, pup. Come to daddy. Here we go." He gestured beckoningly. The terrier barked and reared back.

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"Come on, boy. Jeez." He looked to us for sympathy as we approached. "Lookit this. Here boy, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm just gonna wring your fucking neck. Come on. COME HERE YOU GODDAMN LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT!"

The wolfman lunged, scrambling down and seizing the terrier by the neck, and took a bite on the forearm for his trouble. I heard metal grate on metal. "Ow! Goddammit. That does it." He throttled the little robot, which squealed until its voice was gone. "This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you," said the wolfman, even as he tossed the broken scrap-metal carcass aside. The robot maker and I just stood, staring in stupid wonder.

"Ahem," said the wolfman, picking himself up. "Boy. Where was I? Oh, well. Some other fucking time." He turned his back and walked away, clearing his throat, picking imaginary pieces of lint from his body, tightening an imaginary tie like Rodney Dangerfield.

As soon as the wolfman was over the edge of the pavilion and out of sight the robot maker ran to his ruined terrier and threw his skeletal body over it in sorrow, as though he could shield it from some further indignity. I turned away. I hated the robot maker's weeping. I didn't want to have to comfort him again. The sight of it, frankly, made me sick. It was one of Hell's worst moments. Besides, hanging around the pavilion weeping over his failures was how the robot maker had soaked up so much radiation, and gotten so old. If I stuck around I might get like him.

I snuck away.

7.

A few months after my brush with the support group I met another migrator in a bar.

I'd come back from Hell that afternoon, at work. I reinhabited my body while I was sitting behind the mike, reading out a public service announcement. For once I kept my cool; didn't tell anyone at the station, didn't call Maureen at home. I'd stopped at the bar on my way home, just to get a few minutes for myself before I let Maureen and Peter know I was back.

I got talking to the guy at my right. I don't remember how, but it came out that he was a migrator, too. Just back, like me. We started out boozily jocular, then got quiet as we compared notes, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves, not wanting to trigger anyone's prejudices.

He told me about his Hell, which was pretty crazy. The setting was urban, not rural. He started out on darkened city streets, chased by

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Chinamen driving garbage trucks and shooting at him with pistols. There was a nuclear war; the animals mutated, grew intelligent and vicious. It went on from there.

I told him about mine, and then I told him about the support group and what I'd thought of it.

"Shit, yes," he said. "I went through that bullshit. Don't let them try to tell you what you're going through. They don't know shit. They can't know what we go through. They aren't *there,* man."

I asked him how much of his time he spent in Hell.

"Sheeeit. I'm not back here one day for every ten I spend *there.* I work in a bottling plant, man. Quality control. I look at bottles all day, then I go out drinking with a bunch of other guys from the plant. Least that's what they tell me. When I come back I don't even *know* those guys. Buncha strangers. When I come back"—he raised his glass—"I go out drinking alone."

I asked him about his wife. He finished his drink and ordered another one before he said anything.

"She got sick of waiting around, I guess," he said. "I don't blame her. Least she got me brought back. I owe her *that.*"

We traded phone numbers. He wasn't exactly the kind of guy I'd hang around with under ordinary circumstances, but as it was we had a lot in common.

I called a few times. His answering machine message was like this: "Sorry, I don't seem to be *home* right now. Leave a message at the tone and I'll call you as soon as I'm *back.*"

Maureen told me he called me a few times, too. Always while I was away.

8.

When I leave the robot maker at the pavilion I usually continue north, to the shrunken homes, in the garden of razor blades. The garden begins on the far side of the pavilion. A thicket of trees, at the entrance, only the trees are leafed with razor blades. The moonlight is reflected off a thousand tiny mirrors; it's quite pretty, really. The forest floor is layered with fallen razorblades. They never rust, because it never rains in Hell.

The trees quickly give way to a delicately organized garden, laced with paths, and the bushes and flowers, like the trees before them, are covered with razorblades. The paths wend around to a clearing, and in the middle of the clearing are the shrunken homes. They're built into a gigantic dirt mound, like a desert mesa inhabited by Indians, or a gigantic African anthill. Hundreds of tiny doorways and windows are painstakingly

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carved out of the mound. Found objects are woven into the structure; shirt buttons, safety pins, eyeglass frames, and nail clippers. But no razor blades.

The shrunken humans are just visible as I approach. Tiny figures in little cloth costumes, busily weaving or cooking or playing little ball games on the roofs and patios of the homes. I never get any closer than that before the storm hits.

It's another part of Hell's program. The witch storm rises behind the trees just as I enter the clearing. The witch storm is a tiny, self-contained hurricane, on a scale, I suppose, to match the shrunken homes. A black whirlwind about three times my size. It's a rainless hurricane, an entity of wind and dust that roils into action without warning and sends the shrunken humans scurrying for cover inside the mound.

With good reason. The storm tears razorblades from the treetops and off the surface of the paths and sends them in a whirling barrage against the sides of the shrunken homes. By the time the storm finishes, what was once a detailed, intricate miniature civilization is reduced to an undifferentiated heap of dust and dirt.

There's nothing I can do to stop it. I tried at first. Planted myself between the shrunken homes and the witch storm and tried to fend it off. What I got for my trouble was a rash of tiny razor cuts on my arms and face. By the time the storm retreated I'd barely protected a square foot of the mound from the assault.

The storm is associated with the witch. Don't ask me why. There are times, though, when I think I see a hint of her figure in its whirling form.

If I forget the mound and run for cover I can usually avoid feeling the brunt of it. Running away, I might take a few quick cuts across the shoulders or the backs of my legs, but that's it.

This time I ran so fast I barely took a cut. I ducked underneath a bush that was already stripped clean of blades; its branches protected me. I listened as the storm ravaged the mound, then faded away. A smell of ozone was in the air.

When I looked up again I was looking into the face of Colonel Eagery. The Happy Man.

9.

The only thing that's not predictable, in Hell, the only thing that doesn't happen according to some familiar junction of time and locale, is the appearance of The Happy Man. He's a free operator. He's his own man. He comes and goes as he pleases, etc.

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He's also my ticket home.

When Colonel Eagery is done with me I go back. Back to home reality, back to Maureen and Peter and the radio station where I work. I get to live my life again. No matter where he appears, no matter which tableau he disturbs, Eagery's appearance means I get to go back.

After he's done with me.

Before I left the support group the counselor—the one who'd never even been to Hell—told me to focus on what he called the "reentry episode." He told me that the situation that triggered return was usually the key to Hell, the source of the unresolved tension. The idea, he said, was to identify the corresponding episode in your own past. . . .

I could only laugh.

There's nothing in my life to correspond to Eagery. There couldn't be. Eagery is the heart of my Hell. He's Hell itself. If there had been anything in my life to even approximate The Happy Man I wouldn't be here to tell you about it. I'd be a wimpering, sniveling wreck in a straight-jacket somewhere. Nothing I've encountered in the real world comes close.

Not in *my* reality.

Frankly, if something in the real world corresponds to Colonel Eagery, I don't want to know about it.

10.

The Happy Man lifted me over his shoulder and carried me out of the garden of razorblades, into the dark heart of the woods. When we got to a quiet moonlit grove he set me down.

"There you go, Tom," he said, dusting himself off. He's the only one in Hell who knows my name. "Boy, what a scene. Listen, let's keep it to ourselves, what do you say? Our little secret, okay? A midnight rondee voo."

The Happy Man is always urgently conspiratorial. It's a big priority with him. I feel I should oblige him, though I'm not always sure what he's referring to. I nodded now.

"Yeah." He slapped me on the back, a little too hard. "You and me, the midnight riders, huh? Lone Ranger and Tonto. What do you mean 'we,' white man? Heh. I told you that one? It's like this . . ."

He told me a long, elaborate joke which I failed to understand. Nonetheless, I sat cross-legged in the clearing, rapt.

At the end he laughed for both of us, a loud, sloppy sound that echoed in the trees. "Oh yeah," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "Listen, you want some candy? Chocolate or something?" He rustled in a kit bag. "Or breakfast. It's still pretty early. I bet that goddamned witch didn't feed

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you kids any breakfast, did she?" He took out a bowl and a spoon, then poured in milk and dry cereal from a cardboard box.

The cereal, when I looked, consisted of little puffed and sugar-coated penises, breasts, and vaginas, floating innocently in the milk.

I tried not to gag, or let him see I was having any trouble getting it down. I wanted to please Colonel Eagery, wanted to let him know I was thankful. While I ate he whistled, and unpacked the neckties from his bag.

I watched, curious. "You like these?" he said, holding them up. "Yeah. You'll get to wear them someday. Look real sharp, too. Like your dad. World-beater, that's what you feel like in a necktie." He began knotting them together to make a set of ropes, then looped them around the two nearest trees. "Here," he said, handing me one end. "Pull on this. Can you pull it loose?"

I put down the bowl of cereal and tugged on the neckties.

"Can you? Pull harder."

I shook my head.

"Yeah, they're tough all right. Don't worry about it, though. Your dad couldn't break it either. That's American craftsmanship." He nodded at the cereal. "You done with that? Yeah? C'mere."

I went.

This is my curse: I trust him. Every time. I develop skepticism about the other aspects of Hell; the witch's overdue breakfast, the robot maker's pathetic creations, but Colonel Eagery I trust every time. I am made newly innocent.

"Here," he said. "Hold this." He put one end of the rope in my right hand, and began tying the other end to my left. "Okay." He moved to the right. "What do you mean we, white man? Heh. Cowboys and Indians, Tom. Lift your leg up here—that's a boy. Okay." He grunts over the task of binding me, legs splayed between the two trees. "You an Indian, Tom? Make some noise and let's see."

I started crying.

"Oh, no, don't do that," said The Happy Man, gravely. "Show the Colonel that you're a good sport, for chrissakes. Don't be a *girl*. You'll—you'll ruin all the fun." His earnestness took me by surprise; I felt guilty. I didn't want to ruin anyone's fun. So I managed to stop crying. "That's it, Tommy. Chin up." It wasn't easy, lying there like a low-slung hammock in the dirt, my arms stretched over my head, to put my chin up. I decided it would be enough to smile. "There you go," said Eagery. "God, you're pretty."

The last knot secured, he turned away to dig in his bag, and emerged with a giant, clownish pair of scissors. I squirmed, but couldn't get away. He inserted the blade in my pants cuff and began snipping apart the leg

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of the corduroys. "Heigh ho! Don't move, Tom. You wouldn't want me to clip something off here, would you?" He quickly scissored up both sides, until my pants were hanging in shreds from my outstretched legs, then snipped the remaining link so they fell away. A few quick strokes of the scissors and he'd eliminated my jockey shorts too. "Huh." He tossed the scissors aside and ran his hands up my legs. "Boy, that's smooth. Like a baby."

When he caressed me I got hard, despite my fear.

"Okay. Okay. That feel good? Aw, look at that." He was talking to himself now. A steady patter which he kept up over the sound of my whimpering. "Look here Tom, I got one too. *Big*-size. Daddy-size." He straddled me. "Open up for the choo-choo, Tommy. Uh."

I didn't pass out this time until he flipped me over, my arms and legs twisted, my stomach and thighs pressed into the dirt. Blackness didn't come until then.

Then I crossed back over.

Another safe passage back from Hell, thanks again to The Happy Man.

11.

If anyone at the station had questions about my behavior, they kept them to themselves.

I came back on mike again. "—bumper to bumper down to the Dumbarton . . ." I trailed away in the middle of the traffic report and punched in a commercial break on cart. "Anyone got something to drink?" I said, into the station intercom.

"I think there's some beer in the fridge," said Andrew, the support technician on shift, poking his head into the studio.

"Keep this going," I said, and left. He could run a string of ads, or punch in one of our prerecorded promos. It wasn't a major deviation.

The station fridge was full of rotting, half-finished lunches and pint cartons of sour milk, plus a six-pack of lousy beer. It wasn't Johnnie Walker, but it would do. I needed to wash the memory of Eagery's flesh out of my mouth . . .

I leaned against the wall of the lounge and quietly, methodically, downed the beer.

The programming was piped into the lounge, and I listened as Andrew handled my absence. He loaded in a stupid comedy promo; the words "Rock me" from about a million old songs, spliced together into a noisy barrage. Then his voice came over the intercom. "Lenny's down here, Tom. Take off if you want."

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I didn't need a second hint. In ten minutes I was trapped in the bumper to bumper myself, listening to the station on my car radio.

Maureen's car wasn't in the driveway when I pulled up. She was still at work. No reason to hurry home if she thought I was still away, I suppose. But the lights were on. Peter was home. And, as it turned out, so was Uncle Frank. I'd forgotten about the visit, but while I was away he'd set up in the guestroom.

He and Peter were sitting together in front of the computer, playing Hell. They looked up when I came in, and Peter recognized the change in the tone of my voice right away. Smart kid.

"Hey, Dad." He made a show of introducing us, so Frank would understand that there was a change. "Dad, Uncle Frank's here."

Frank and I shook hands.

I hadn't seen my father's brother for seven or eight years, and in that time he'd aged decades. He was suddenly a grey old man. It immediately made me wonder how my father would look if he were still around.

"Tommy," Frank said. "It's been a long time." His voice was as faded and weak as everything else. I could hear him trying to work out the difference between me now and the zombie version he'd been living with for the past few days.

I didn't let him wonder for too long. I gave his hand a good squeeze, and then I put my arms around him. I needed the human contact anyway, after Hell.

"I need a drink," I said. "Frank?" I cocked my head toward the living room. Uncle Frank nodded.

The kid got the drift on his own. "I'll see you later, Dad." He turned back to his computer, made a show of being involved.

I led Frank to the couch and poured us both a drink.

Though I hadn't seen him since before I died, Uncle Frank knew all about my situation. We wrote letters, and every once in a while spoke on the phone. Frank had never married, and after my father died he and I were one another's only excuse for "family." He wasn't well off, but he'd wired Maureen some cash when I died. In letters he'd been generous, too, sympathetic and unsuperstitious. I'd unloaded a certain measure of my guilt and shame at what my resurrection had done to the marriage in the letters, and he was always understanding. But I could see now that he was having to make an effort, in person, not to appear uncomfortable. He'd been living with my soulless, mechanical self for a few days, and he'd presumably gotten used to that. But now his eyes told me that he needed to figure out who he was talking to.

For my part, I was making an adjustment to the changes in Frank. In my memory he was permanently in his forties, a more garrulous and eccentric version of my father. Frank had been the charismatic oddball

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in the family, never without a quip, never quite out of the doghouse, but always expansive and charming. I'd often thought that my falsely genial on-radio persona was based on a pale imitation of Frank. Only now he just seemed tired and old.

"You've got a nice set-up here, Tom," he said quietly.

"That's Maureen's work," I said. "She busts her ass keeping it all together."

Frank nodded. "I've seen."

"How long you staying with us?"

Now Frank snickered in a way that recalled, if only faintly, the man I remembered. "How long you have me?"

"You don't need to be back?" How Frank made his living had always been unclear. He'd been a realtor at some point, then graduated to the nebulous status of "consultant." Professional bullshitter was always my hunch.

But now he said: "I'm not going back. I think I want to set up out here for a while."

"Well, for my part you're welcome to stick around until you find a place," I said. He'd sounded uncomfortable, and I decided not to pry. "It's really up to Maureen, you understand. The burden's on her—"

"Oh, I've been helping out," he said quickly. "I've become quite a chef, actually . . ."

The way he trailed away told me I'd probably already eaten several of his meals. "I'm sure," I said. There was a pause. "Listen, Frank, let's break the ice. I don't remember shit about what happens while I'm away. Treat me like a newborn babe when I come back. One who nurses on a whiskey tumbler."

I watched him relax. He lowered his eyes and said: "I'm sorry, Tom. I haven't been around family, I mean *real* family, for so long. . . . It's got me thinking about the past. You know. . . ," He looked up sharply. "You're a grown man. Have been for a long time. But your dad and your mom and you as a little kid, me coming to visit—that's how I remember you. Always will, I think."

"I understand." I worked on my whiskey.

"Anyway—" He waved his hand dismissively. "It's good to see you finally. Good to see the three of you together, making it go."

"I'm glad it looks good." I could only be honest. "It isn't always easy."

"Oh, I didn't mean, I mean, yes. Of course. And anything, any little thing I can do to help—" He watched my eyes for reaction, looking terribly uncomfortable. "And, uh, Tom?"

I nodded.

"I already mentioned this to Maureen and Peter. Uh, you don't seem to pick up the phone when you're away, but now that you're back—"

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"Yes?"

"If you do pick up the phone, if anyone calls, *I'm not here,* okay?"

"Sure, Frank."

"I just need to create a little distance right now," he said obscurely.

I wasn't sure whether to press him on the point. My chance was taken away, anyway, by Maureen's arrival. She walked in and peered at us over the top of a couple of bags of groceries, then took them on into the kitchen without saying a word. She knew I was back. The drink in my hand told her all she needed to know.

Frank got up and hurried into the kitchen behind her. I heard him insist on putting away the groceries by himself.

Then Maureen came out. I put my drink on the coffee table and stood up and we stood right next to each other, close without quite touching for a long time. Quiet, knowing that when words came things might get too complicated again. In the background I could hear Frank putting the groceries into the fridge and the gentle, hurried tapping of Peter's fingers on his keyboard.

Maureen and I sat on the couch and kissed.

"Hey," came Frank's voice eventually. "Pete and I were talking about catching a movie or something. We could get a slice of pizza too, take the car and be back in a few hours—"

"Peter?" I said.

He appeared in the doorway, right on cue. "Yeah, Dad, there's a new Clive Barker movie—"

"Homework?"

"Didn't get any."

I gave Frank the car keys and twenty bucks for pizza, or whatever. I was being tiptoed around, sure, but I didn't let myself feel patronized. The few breaks I get I earn, twice over.

They left, and Maureen and I went back to kissing on the couch. We still hadn't exchanged a word. After a while we went into the bedroom like that, affectionate, silent. We didn't get around to words until an hour or so later.

Turned out it was just as well.

12.

Maureen had closed her eyes and rolled over on her side, curled against me. But the muscles of her mouth were tight; she wasn't asleep. I put my hand in her hair and said her name. She said mine.

"How's it been?" I said.

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She waited a while before answering. "I don't know, Tom. Okay, I guess."

"I wasn't gone too long this time," I said, though it didn't need saying.

She sighed. "That last one just took something out of me."

"What are you saying?"

She spoke quietly, tonelessly, into the crook of my arm. "I don't know how long you'll be around. I can't trust it anymore. I feel like if I let myself relax I'll get ripped off again."

There wasn't any answer to that, so I shut up and let the subject drop. "Peter all right?"

"Yes. Always. He's going to be on some debating thing now. I think he likes having Frank around."

"Do you?"

She didn't answer the question. "He's so different from when I first met him, Tom. When we got married. I thought he was such a buffoon. Such a loud, intrusive character." She laughed. "I was afraid we'd have a son like him. Now he's so *polite.*"

"He's a guest in your house," I pointed out.

"It's not just that," she said. "He's gotten old, I guess."

"He said he's been cooking. Is he in your way? He'll go if I tell him to."

"He wants to move out here. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes," I said. And thought *as well as something odd about the telephone.* I didn't say it. "But he's got money, I think. We'll find him a place—" I stopped. She still hadn't said whether she wanted him around, and the gap was beginning to irritate me. I was sensitive enough to her by now that I noticed what wasn't being said.

And she was smart enough to notice my irritation.

"He's fine, really," she said quickly. "He's actually quite a help, cooking . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've just gotten used to being alone, Tom. With you gone, and Peter out with his friends. I've had a lot of freedom."

The skin on my back began to crawl. I took my hand out of her hair.

"Say it," I said.

She sighed. "I'm trying to. I've been lonely, Tom. And I don't mean lonely for some odd old relative of yours to sleep in the guestroom, either."

"Is it someone I know?"

"No."

I thought I could manage a couple more questions before I blew my cool. "Does Peter know?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus, Tom. Yes, I'm sure."

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"What about Frank?"

"What about him? I didn't tell him. I can't imagine how he'd guess."

"There aren't any letters, then. Or weird phone calls. You aren't being sloppy—"

"No, Tom."

That was all I could take. In pretty much one motion I got up and put on my pants. Almost burst a blood vessel buttoning my shirt.

Then I surprised myself: I didn't hit her.

Instead I put on my shoes and went to the kitchen for a bottle, and sat down on the couch in the moonlight and drank.

It wasn't any good: I couldn't be in the house. I put on a jacket and took the bottle for a walk around the neighborhood.

13.

To the west, in my Hell, there's a place I call the ghost town. It's like a western movie set, with cheap façades passing for buildings, and if anyone lives there, they're hiding. The moon lights the main street from behind a patch of trees, throwing cigarette butts and crumpled foil wrappers discarded there into high relief. Sometimes I can make out hoofprints in the dust.

In the middle of the street is a naked, crying baby.

Gusts of wind rise as I walk through the ghost town, and they grow stronger as I approach the baby, whipping the dust and refuse of the street into its face. The baby's crying chokes into a cough, sputters, then resumes, louder than before. The baby is cold, I can tell; I'm cold myself, there in the ghost town. By the time I reach down to pick up the baby, the wind tearing through my little chest, I'm seeking its warmth as much as offering my own.

If I pick up the baby it turns into The Happy Man. Instantly. Every time.

I've already said what happens when The Happy Man appears.

Needless to say, then, I avoid the ghost town. I steer a wide berth around it. I often avoid the west altogether. As much as I want to go back to my life, I can't bring myself to pick up the baby, knowing that I'm bringing on Colonel Eagery. I'm not capable of it. And I'm not comfortable walking through that town, feeling the rising wind and listening to the baby's cries, and not doing anything. Hell seems so contingent on my actions; maybe if I don't go in that direction there isn't a baby in the first place. I'd like to think so.

Anyway, it had been months since I'd walked through the ghost town.

But I walked through it that night, in my dreams. I don't know why.

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14.

I woke up still dressed and clutching the bottle, on the living room couch. What woke me was the noise in the kitchen. Maureen making breakfast for Peter.

Head low, I slunk past the kitchen doorway and into the bedroom.

By the time I woke again Peter was off to school, and Maureen was out too, at work. I put myself through the shower, then called the station and said I wasn't coming in. They took it all right.

When I went back out I found Uncle Frank making coffee, enough for two. I accepted a cup and grunted my thanks.

"Can you handle some eggs?" he asked. "There's an omelet I've been meaning to try. You can be my guinea pig . . ."

I cleared my throat. "Uh, sure," I said.

He went into action while I let the coffee work on my mood. I was impressed, actually. Frank seemed to have diverted some of his eccentric passion into cookery. He knew how to use all the wedding-present stuff that Maureen and I had let gather dust. The smells charmed me halfway out of my funk.

"Here we go." He juggled it out of the pan and onto a plate, sprinkled some green stuff on top and put it in front of me. I waited for him to cut it in half, and when he didn't I said: "What about you?"

"Oh," he said. "I ate before. Please."

I put the whole thing away without any trouble. Frank sipped his coffee and watched while I ate.

"I used to cook for you when you were a little boy," he said. " 'Course then it was eggs in bacon grease, smeared with catsup—"

My throat suddenly tightened in a choking spasm. I spurted coffee and bits of eggs across the table, almost into Frank's lap. He got up and slapped at my back, but by then it was over.

"Jeez," I said. "Some kind of hangover thing. I'm sorry . . ."

"Relax, Tom." He got me a glass of water. "Probably the memory of those old breakfasts. . . ." He laughed.

"Yeah." *Or the thought of Maureen and her new pal in the sack . . .* I didn't say it, though. I suddenly felt intense shame. Frank represented my family, he stood in for my dad. I didn't want him to know the reason for my bender.

"Listen, Tom," he said. "What say we go down to the water today? That's not a long drive, is it?"

"Sounds great," I admitted. "I need to get out of the house."

An hour later we parked out by the marina and walked down to the strip of beach. I expected Uncle Frank to tire quickly; instead I had to hurry to keep up. I felt like I was seeing him slowly come back to life,

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first in the kitchen, concocting the omelet, and now out here on the beach. He seemed to sense the deadness and emptiness in me and tried valiantly to carry on both ends of a chatty conversation. I heard glimpses of the old raconteur in his voice, which only made me wonder more what had sent it into hiding in the first place.

"Frank," I said, when he came to the end of a story, "what happened? What's got you on the run?"

He took a deep breath and looked out over the water. "I was hoping that wouldn't come up, Tom. I don't want to get you or Maureen into it . . ."

"I'll decide what I want to get into," I said. "Besides, it doesn't necessarily protect us to keep us in the dark."

He turned and looked me in the eye. "That's a point. It's—it's the mob, Tom. Only it's not so simple anymore, to just say mob. There's a blurry territory where it crosses over into some federal agency . . . anyway, it's enough to say that I got crossed up with some real bad guys. I screwed 'em on some property." He was looking out to sea again, and I couldn't read his expression. "I'm not sure how much they really care, or how long before they get distracted by something else. Could be they just wanted to throw a scare at me. I just know it felt like time to get out of town for a while."

"God, Frank. I'm sorry. That sounds tough."

"Ah, it's all my own goddamn fault. Anyway, I won't stay much longer at your place. I would have gone already if you weren't—you know, away. And Pete seemed—I don't know. I felt like I could be of some use. It took my mind off my own problems."

"Stay as long as you like, Frank."

He smiled grimly. "I'm not necessarily in the right, you know . . ."

"Don't bother," I said. "When you go through some of the shit I've gone through it gives you a different perspective. Right isn't always a relevant concept. You're family."

He turned and looked at me, then. Hard. Suddenly he wasn't just my clichéd notion of "Uncle Frank" anymore; he was a complex, intelligent, and not always easy to comprehend man whom I'd known since before I could remember. Maybe it was just my emotional state, but for a moment I was terrified.

"Thanks, Tom."

"Uh, don't mention it."

We looked out over the water for a while then, without saying anything.

"I'm hip to Maureen," said Frank after a while.

I probably tightened my fists in my pockets, but that was it.

"There isn't really anything to say," he went on. "Just that you've got my sympathy."

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"Don't hold it against her," I said. "I make it pretty tough. My—my whole set-up makes it pretty tough."

"Yeah."

"Have you met him?" I asked.

"Nope. Just a phone call I wasn't supposed to hear. Not her fault. My ears tend to prick up at the sound of the phone right now."

"Peter?"

"Jeez. I don't think so, Tom. Not that I know of. But he's a smart kid."

"No kidding."

We came to a high place over the water, with a concrete platform and a rusted steel railing. I leaned on it and smelled the mist. Birds wheeled overhead. I thought about the night before, and wondered what I was going to say to Maureen the next time I saw her.

After a while I guess I choked up a little. "God damn," I said. "I didn't even get to see my kid last night."

"That's not your fault," said Frank quietly.

"I always hang out with the kid, Frank. I'm never so wrapped up in my goddamned problems that I don't have time for him. I only just got back."

Frank got a cheerleader tone in his voice again. "Let's go pick him up at school," he said. "Smart guy like him can miss half a day."

"I don't know."

"C'mon. It's easy. You just show up and they turn him over. Big treat, makes him a celebrity with all his pals."

"You do this a lot?"

Frank got suddenly serious. "Uh, no," he said. He almost sounded offended, for no reason I could discern. "They'd never turn the child over to anyone but his mother or father." He turned away, the mood between us suddenly and inexplicably sour.

"Something the matter?" I said.

He closed his eyes for a minute. "Sorry, Tom. I guess I just suddenly had an image of my friends from back east showing up at the schoolyard. I'm just being paranoid . . ."

We exchanged a long look.

"Let's go," I said.

15.

It was a relief to learn what a pain in the ass it was to get a kid out of school halfway through the day. We had to fill out a visitor's form just to go to the office, and then we had to fill out another form to get per-

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mission to yank Peter from class, and then a secretary walked us to the classroom anyway.

It turned out it was a computer class. A bunch of the kids there had played Peter's software Hell, which made me a visiting celebrity. I had to shake a bunch of little hands to get back out.

Frank was right: the visit would make Peter the most popular kid in school tomorrow.

We went out for hamburgers downtown, then we went back home. If Peter was disturbed by my drunken sprawl on the couch that morning he did a good job of covering it up. He and Frank were full of computer talk, and I could see how well they were getting along.

Eventually we got around to the traditional post-Hell update, Peter and I huddled at the computer, punching in whatever new information I'd picked up on my trip. This time Frank sat in.

"Robot maker built a terrier," I said. "A little livelier than the usual crap . . ." Peter typed it into the proper file. "But Eagery's thing was a robot wolfman, as tall as me—me *now,* not in Hell. He could talk. He sounded like Eagery, actually." I turned to Frank. "The Happy Man's personality has a way of pervading his robots . . ."

Peter's cross-reference check flagged the wolfman entry, and he punched up the reference. "In the south, dad, remember? You met a wolfman, a real one, in the woods. You played Monopoly with him, then he turned into Colonel Eagery."

"Yeah, yeah. Never saw him again."

"Boy," said Frank, speaking for the first time since we'd punched up Hell. "You guys are thorough. What do you think the wolfman means?"

I froze up inside.

But before I could speak Peter turned, twisted his mouth and shook his head. "Hell doesn't *mean* anything," he said. "That's not the right approach." He'd heard the spiel a dozen times from me, and I guessed he'd sensed my tenderness on the issue; he was sticking up for his dad.

Then he surprised me by taking it further. "Hell is like an alternate world, like in *X-Men.* It's a real place, like here, only different. If you were going down the street and you met a wolfman you wouldn't ask what it *means.* You'd run, or whatever."

Frank, who hadn't noticed my discomfort, winked at me and said: "Okay, Pete. I stand corrected."

Peter and I went back to our entry, more or less ignoring Frank. A few minutes later Maureen's car pulled up in the driveway. I tried not to let my sudden anxiety show, for the kid's sake.

"Tom."

She stood in Peter's doorway, still in her coat. When I looked up she didn't say anything more, just inclined her head in the direction of the

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bedroom. I gave Frank the seat beside Peter at the computer, and followed her.

"Look at you," she said when we were out of earshot.

"What?"

"When you're not drunk you're retreating into the computer. It's just as bad, you know. Computer Hell. You've found a way to be there all the time, one way or another. You don't live here anymore."

"Maureen—"

"What's worse is the way you're taking him *with* you. Making him live in your Hell, too. Making him think it's something great. When you're not here he and his friends spend all day in front of that thing, living your Hell for you. Does it make you feel less lonely? Is that it?"

"I live here." I knew I had to keep my voice quiet and steady and fierce or she'd talk right over me, and soon we'd be shouting. I didn't want it to escalate. "Last thing I knew I lived here with *you*. Maybe that's not the way it is anymore. But I live here. Seems to me it's you who's got one foot out the door."

There was a moment of silence and then it hit me. Call me stupid, but it was the first time I felt the impact. *Last night, making love, had been goodbye*. The gulf between us now was enormous. Things weren't going to suddenly get better.

It would take a huge amount of very hard, very painful work to fix it, if it could be fixed at all.

"Do you ever think of the effect it has on *him?*" She was sticking to safe territory. I didn't blame her. She had a lot of it. "You and your goddamned *inner landscape*—"

She broke off, sobbing. It was as though she'd been saving those words, and their release had opened the floodgates. It also occurred to me that she was opting for tears so I wouldn't attack her, and I felt a little cheated.

Anyway, I took her in my arms. I'm not completely stupid.

"I don't want him to live like that," she said. Her fists balled against my chest for a moment, then her body went slack, and I had to hold her up while she cried. After a minute we sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't know, Tom. I don't know what's happening."

"Well, neither do I." I felt suddenly exhausted and hollow. "I mean, it seems like the ball's in your court—"

I could feel her tensing up against my shoulder. So I dropped it.

I smelled onions frying in butter. I listened: Frank was cooking again, and explaining the recipe to Peter.

"It's not an inner landscape," I said quietly. "It's a place where I live half my life. I get to share that with my son—"

She pulled away from me and stood up, straightened her clothes. Then she went into the living room, without looking back.

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16.

I lay back on the bed, only meaning to buy some time. But I must have been depleted, morally and otherwise, and I fell asleep, and slept through dinner.

When I woke again the house was dark. Peter was in his room; I could see the glow of the night light in the hallway. Maureen was slipping into bed beside me.

When I reached for her she pushed me away.

I didn't make it into a big deal. I didn't feel particularly angry, not at the time. In a few minutes we were both asleep again.

17.

When I woke again it was to the sun streaming in across the bed, heating me to a sweat under the covers. It was Saturday; no work for me or Maureen, no school for Peter. But Maureen was gone. I didn't feel too good, and I lay there for a while just looking at the insides of my eyelids. There wasn't any noise in the house, and I suspected they'd all gone out somewhere to get out from under the shadow of you-know-who.

I didn't let it bug me: I took a nice slow shower and went into the kitchen and made some coffee and toast.

But I was wrong. Peter was home. He wandered into the kitchen while I was cleaning up, and said: "Hey, Dad."

This time I could see he knew something was wrong. I didn't have what it took to keep it from him, and I guess he didn't have what it took to keep it from me, either.

"Hey, Pete," I said. "Where's your mom?"

"They went out shopping," he said. "Also to look at some place for Uncle Frank to live."

I nodded. "What you doing?"

"I don't know. Just some game stuff I got from Jeremy."

"It looks like a pretty nice day out there—"

"I know, I know. I heard it already, from Mom." He looked down at his feet.

There was a minute or two of silence while I finished clearing the table.

"I guess I should offer to 'throw the old pigskin around' or something," I said. "But the truth is I don't feel up to it right now . . ."

The truth was my guts were churning. I couldn't focus on the kid. Seeing him left alone just made me think of Maureen and where she probably was right now. Frank was almost certainly playing the beard

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for her, and "shopping" by himself. If they came home with packages she'd have to unpack them to know what was in them.

"That's okay," he said seriously. "I don't think we have an old pigskin anyway."

I managed a smile.

"I'll be in my room, okay Dad?"

"Okay, Peter."

Pretty soon I heard him tapping at his computer again. I sat and nursed the cold coffee and ran my thoughts through some pretty repetitive and unproductive loops. And then it hit me.

Just a twinge at first. But unmistakable.

I was on my way back to Hell.

I realized I'd felt inklings earlier that morning, in the shower, even in bed, and hadn't let myself notice. It was already pretty far along. I was probably an hour or so away from crossing over.

By this time I'd perfected a kind of emotional shorthand. I went through all the traditional stages in the space of a few seconds: denial, bargaining, fear, etc. But underlying them all, this time, was a dull, black rage.

I'd almost never had so short a time back. That hurt. The fact that I was crossing over while Maureen was holed up in her midday love nest hurt more. Unless she came back in the next hour I wouldn't get in another word. I couldn't make up, couldn't plead, and I couldn't threaten, either, or issue an ultimatum. All the words I'd been rehearsing in my head flew right out the window. She would come home to find me a zombie again.

I felt my claim on her, and my claim on my own life—Peter, the apartment, everything—slipping away. I had a sudden, desperate need to at least see Peter. I would cram two weeks worth of unfinished business into the next hour. I got up and went into his room, my head whirling.

He turned from the computer when I appeared in his doorway. "Hey, Dad," he said. "Look at this. I had an idea about Hell."

I went and sat down beside him. I was afraid to open my mouth, afraid of what would or wouldn't come out. I wanted to put on a big show of fatherly affection but I couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

Peter pretended not to notice. "Look." He'd punched up our entry for the starting point: the breakfast table, the horse, and the witch's house. "You get up from the table," he said. "You go off through the hedge in some direction, east, west, north, south. But there's a direction you never go in. It's so obvious; I can't believe we never thought of it."

It wasn't obvious to me, and I felt irritation. "Where? What direction?"

"*The witch's house.* You want breakfast, right? Why not just go in and get some? Why not find out what she's doing in there?"

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The idea terrified me instantly. Me, a little boy, barging into the house of that beautiful, unapproachable woman . . . but Peter didn't know about the emotional content of Hell. I'd kept that from him. "It's an idea," I conceded. "Uh, yeah. It's an idea."

"It could be the key to the whole thing, Dad. Who knows. You've got to find out."

"The purloined letter," I said, talking more to myself than to Peter.

"What?"

"The purloined letter," I said. "It's from a famous story. The idea of something so obvious, just sitting right out there in plain sight, but nobody notices . . ." I was drifting off into talking to myself again. I couldn't stay focused on Peter. I was thinking about Maureen and her friend, and my thoughts were very, very murky.

"Will you try?" said Peter. "Will you check it out?"

"I might," I snapped, suddenly angry. It was as though he knew I was about to go back. As though he knew and didn't care, almost as though he were taunting me. But of course he didn't know. I hadn't said anything.

He pretended he hadn't heard the tension in my voice, and went on, bright-eyed. "It could be nothing, really. Just another stupid dead end. Or the door is locked or something . . ."

"No, no," I said, wanting to reassure him now. "It's a good idea, Pete. An inspiration . . ."

We drifted off into a mutually embarrassed silence.

"Is Uncle Frank a lot like my grandfather?" asked Peter suddenly.

"Well, no. Not really. Why?"

"I dunno. He just seems so different from you. It's hard for me to see how you might be related. I can't imagine what your dad was like."

"Different how?"

"Oh, you know, Dad. You're so serious. Uncle Frank seems like he's almost younger than you."

"Younger?"

"He's just sillier, that's all. He says weird things. I can't really explain, but it's like he's some kind of cartoon character, or somebody you'd tell me about in a story. He reminds me of somebody from Hell, like the robot maker, or—"

That's where Peter stopped, because I hit him.

Hit him hard. Knocked him out of his chair and onto the floor.

My anger had been spiraling while he spoke. I thought about Frank out covering Maureen's ass, the two of them leaving the kid alone so she could squeeze in a quick lay, and that got me thinking about all the manipulative, unpleasant things Frank had done over the years. And now the kid was falling for it, falling for the image of the wacky, irresponsible, cartoon-character uncle who picked you up at school in the

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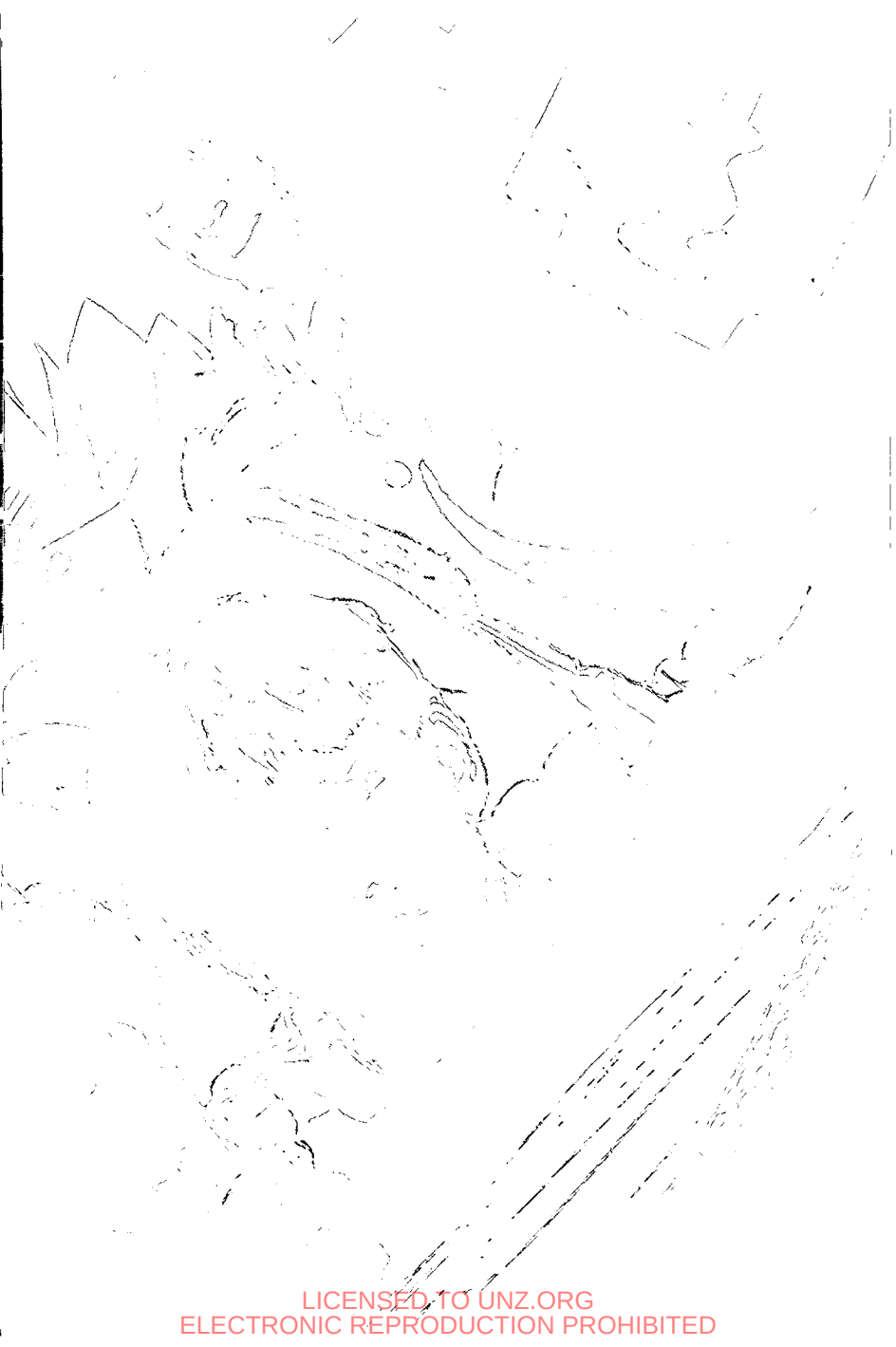

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middle of the day, who seemed so much more charismatic than boring old Dad.

I remembered falling for it myself, and I wondered if my father ever felt anything like the jealousy I felt now.

Peter sat on the floor, whimpering. I held my hand up to my face and looked at it, astonished.

Then I walked out of the room. I couldn't face him. I couldn't think of what to say.

Besides, I was going to Hell.

I was glad. It was where I belonged.

18.

I sat at the table for a long time, watching the horse quiver and twitch as the flies crawled over his lips, watching the other children giggle and whisper and play with their silverware, listening to the sound of insects in the woods beyond the hedge, smelling the smoke that trailed out of the witch's chimney, quietly seething. I don't think I ever hated my Hell as badly as I did now. Now that my other life, my real life, had become a Hell, too.

Eventually I got out of my seat. But I couldn't bring myself to run for the hedge to the north, or in any direction for that matter. I stood on the grass beside my chair, paralyzed by Peter's suggestion.

After a minute or so I took a first, tentative step across the grass, toward the witch's hut. It seemed like a mile to the cobblestone steps at the door. I tried the handle; it turned easily. The room was dark. I stepped inside.

The Happy Man was turned away from me, facing the table, his pants down around his ankles, his pale, hairy buttocks squeezed together. Splayed out on the table, her bare legs in the air, was the witch. The Happy Man had one hand over her mouth, the other on her breasts.

"Oh, shit," he said, when he heard me come in. He stopped thrusting and hurriedly pulled up his pants. "What are you doing in here?" He turned away, left the witch scrambling to cover herself on the table. Despite my astonishment at finding Eagery in the hut, I managed to ogle her for a moment. She was beautiful.

"Breakfast," I got out. "I wanted breakfast."

"Oh, yeah?" The Happy Man didn't sound playful. He was advancing on me fast. I tried to turn and leave but he grabbed me and pinned me against the wall. "Breakfast is served," he said. He lifted me by my belt and took me to the stove. I could feel its heat as I dangled there. He opened the door with his free hand. Inside there was a pie baking; it

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smelled wonderful. The breakfast we'd always hoped for. Eagery dropped me onto the open door.

My hands and knees immediately burned. I heard myself pleading, but The Happy Man didn't pay any attention; he began pushing the door closed, wedging me into the hot oven with the pie, battering at my dangling arms and legs until I pulled them in, then slamming the door closed and leaning on it with his full weight.

I fell into the pie, and burning sugar stuck to my back. I think I screamed. Eagery kicked at the oven, jolting it off the floor, until I was silent. Eventually I died.

Died back into my own life, of course. Peter was right. He'd discovered a shortcut.

Lucky me.

19.

I came back in the house this time, sitting alone in the living room, watching television. That's how I spend a lot of my zombie hours, according to Maureen. It was midday, and I suspected I hadn't been away long at all. I checked my watch. Sure enough, less than twenty-four hours had passed. It was the second day of the weekend; my shortest stay in Hell ever, by several days.

I turned off the television and went into the kitchen to make myself some coffee. The house was empty. The day was pretty bright, and I suspected they'd gone out for a picnic or something up at the park. I had a few hours alone with my thoughts.

Still, it wasn't until I heard their car in the driveway that I had my big idea.

I had the tube on again. That was part of it. It had something to do with not wanting to face them, too. Not knowing what to say to Maureen, or Peter. When I heard the car pull up I felt my tongue go numb in my mouth.

By the time Maureen got her key in the door it was a fully hatched plan. I stared at the television as they came in, keeping my breath steady, trying not to meet their eyes. There was a moment of silence as Maureen checked me out and determined that I was still away, in Hell.

Then the conversation picked up again, like I wasn't even there.

"—what's he watching?"

"That horrible cop thing. Peter, for god's sake, turn it down. I don't want to listen to that. Or change the channel—," To Frank: "He won't notice. If he doesn't like it he'll just get up and go away. But he never

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does. I've seen him sit through hours and hours of Peter's horror things . . ."

I would have enjoyed proving her wrong, but I didn't want to risk anything that would blow my cover. So I sat there while Peter flipped the dial, settling eventually on the news.

The lead story was a minor quake in L.A., and like all good Californians they took the bait, crowded around me on the couch for a look at the damage: a couple of tilted cars on a patch of split pavement, a grandmother face down on her lawn, pet dog sniffing at her displaced wig. Maureen and Frank sat to my left, and Peter pushed up close to me at my right. It was our first physical contact in a long time—unless you counted the punch.

But Peter didn't sit still for very long. He squirmed in his seat until Maureen noticed.

"Mom?" he said. When he leaned forward I saw the big purple bruise I'd left on the side of his face.

"What?"

He held his nose and made a face. "I think Dad needs a shower."

20.

The quality of their disregard was terrifying. I wasn't, as I'd flattered myself by imagining, a monster in their midst, a constant reminder of a better life that had eluded them. They weren't somber or mournful at all. They *coped*. I was a combination of a big, stupid pet and an awkward, unplugged appliance too big for the closet. I was in the way. It was too soon for them to begin hoping—or dreading—that I'd come back, and in the meantime I was a hungry, smelly nuisance.

When Maureen leaned in close and suggested I go clean myself up I knew to agree politely and follow the suggestion. I welcomed the chance to get away from them and reconnoiter, anyway.

When I emerged from my shower they were already at the table eating. I suppose I shouldn't have expected an invitation. They'd set a place for me, and I went and sat in it, and ate, quietly, and listened while they talked.

The subject of Peter's "injury" came up only once, and then just barely. I gathered that Frank and Maureen had decided to suppress any discussion, to play it down, and hope that Peter was still young enough that he would just plain forget. Find some childlike inner resource for blurring experience into fantasy.

Maybe they would confront me later, when I came back, with Peter out at a friend's house. But the subject was obviously taboo right now.

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The discussion mostly centered on Frank's plans. The apartment he was looking at, and some second thoughts he seemed to be having about settling in this area. I sensed an undercurrent, between him and Maureen, of what wasn't being discussed: Frank's trouble. The phone calls he was avoiding. Yet more stuff for Peter not to hear. I wondered, though, knowing Peter's smarts, how much he was picking up anyway.

I was dying for a drink. I tried not to let it show on my face.

After the meal Frank pleaded exhaustion, and went into the guest-room, and Maureen read a book on the bed. I set up in front of the television and tried not to think about what I was doing or why I was doing it. I walked though the apartment a couple of times on my way to the bathroom, and when I passed Peter's door he looked up from his computer, and I had to struggle not to meet his eye. He would have admired my ruse, and I would have liked to let him in on it, but that wasn't possible. So I stalked past his room like a zombie, and he turned back to his homework. I spent most of the evening on the couch, slogging through prime time. After Maureen tucked Peter into bed I followed her into the bedroom.

She made the phone call about five minutes after she turned off the lights. "Philip?" she whispered.

A pause.

"Can you talk? I couldn't sleep." Pause. "No, he's right here in bed with me. Of course he can't hear. I mean it doesn't matter, even if he can. No. No. It's not that." She sighed. "I just miss you."

I guess he talked a bit.

"You do?" she said, her voice half-melted. I hadn't heard her that way in a while. "Philip. Yes, I know. But it's not that easy. You know. Yes. I wish I could." They went on like that. Her voice was quiet enough that Peter and Frank wouldn't hear, but in the darkened bedroom it was like a stage play. I could almost make out her boyfriend's tinny replies over the phone.

Then she giggled and said: "I'm touching myself too."

Thank god it was dark. My face must have been crimson. I felt the room whirling like a centrifuge, the bed at the center, and my body felt like it was made of lead. I weighed a thousand or a million pounds and I was crushed into my place there on the bed beside Maureen by the pressure of gravity. I couldn't move. I felt my blood pounding in my wrists and temples.

Why was I there? What was I trying to prove?

I knew, dimly, that I'd had some reason for the deception, that some part of me had insisted that there was something I could learn, something vital.

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It couldn't have been this, though. I didn't need this.

So what was I after? What—

I sat bolt upright in the bed, dislodging the covers.

"Huh?" said Maureen. "Nothing, nothing. Listen, I have to go, I'll call you back." She hung up and turned on the light. I turned and looked at her in shock. She opened her mouth to scream, and somehow I got my hand over her mouth first. I wrestled her down against the bed, pushed her face into the pillow, twisted her arm behind her back, put my weight on her.

I could hear her yelling my name into the pillow, wetly. Her ears were bright red.

I tightened my grip on her arm. "Shhh," I said, closer to her ear. "No noise. No noise." I listened at the hall, alert now, panicked. I had to convince her. "No noise."

"You're dead," she hissed when I let her up for air. "All I have to do is report you. You're dead." Her eyes were slits.

"Shhh." I let her go, forgot her. Focused on the hall.

There wasn't any light. Peter's night light was out, or his door was closed. Impossible. Peter wouldn't permit it.

Someone was in the house. Frank's pals.

I slid into my pants, silently. I was operating with my Hell-reflexes now, and they were good. There wasn't going to be any hostage. I would make sure of that. I would have complete surprise.

I turned back to Maureen. "Call your pal," I whispered. "Keep it quiet. Have him bring in the cops, but quiet, and slow." She looked at me, stunned out of her outrage. "I'm serious. Call him. And stay in here. Whatever happens."

I didn't leave her time for questions. In my pants and bare feet I crept out into the hall and made my way to Peter's door.

Inside I heard him whimpering quietly, as if through a gag.

I burst in.

Peter was spread-eagled on his bed, bound with neckties. His pajamas were in shreds around his ankles. Frank, who wasn't wearing anything at all, was kneeling on the side of the bed, as if praying over Peter's helpless body. One had was resting lightly on Peter's stomach. In the other hand he held his own penis. His pubic hair was white. He looked up at me, and his eyes widened for a moment, then fell. And then he grinned. His hands stayed where they were.

I picked up Peter's keyboard and smashed it against Frank's white skull. He straightened up and stopped grinning, and reached back to feel his head.

"Tommy," he said, his voice soft, almost beguiling.

I drew the keyboard back like a baseball bat and hit him again. This

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time I drew blood. I didn't stop hitting him until he fell back against the floor, his mouth open, his eyes full of tears, his erection wilting.

Peter watched the whole thing from the bed, his mouth gagged, his eyes wide. When I dropped the keyboard and looked up he met my eyes, for a minute. Then I looked away. I found his floppy discs for Hell, the main disc and the backup, and I tore them in half and tossed them onto the floor, beside Frank.

Peter didn't get untied until the police showed up. Maureen was hiding in her room and I, try as I might, just couldn't bring myself to *touch* him.

21.

I live alone now. The settlement went like this: I see Peter every other weekend—if I happen to be back from Hell, that is—and only in the company of his mother. And I don't go anywhere near the house.

Yes, Uncle Frank was Colonel Eagery, aka The Happy Man. He'd molested me as a boy, right in our house, while my father was away, and with my mother in the kitchen making breakfast. I remember it all now.

And yes, I killed him.

Needless to say, there wasn't any mob on his trail. The call he'd been dreading was the Baltimore police. He was on the run from a molestation offense.

Like I said, I live alone. It's a pretty nice place, and a lot closer to the station. There's a pretty nice bar around the corner. Different crowd every night.

Yes, I still go to Hell, but it's different now. There isn't any horse, or witch, or Happy Man. There isn't even a forest.

When I go to Hell now it's like this:

I'm back in the house with Maureen and Peter. I live with them again. But I'm unable to speak, or reach out to them: I'm a zombie. I start by sitting in front of the television, flipping channels, and then eventually I wander around the house, brushing past Maureen, but never able to speak to her, never able to take her hand or hold her or lead her into the bedroom. After a while I go and stand in the doorway of Peter's room. He turns and looks up at me, but I look away, afraid to meet his eye. I pretend to look the other way, and he goes back to his computer.

And that's it. I spend the rest of the time standing in his doorway, looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

Watching him play my Hell. ●

—for Stanley Ellin

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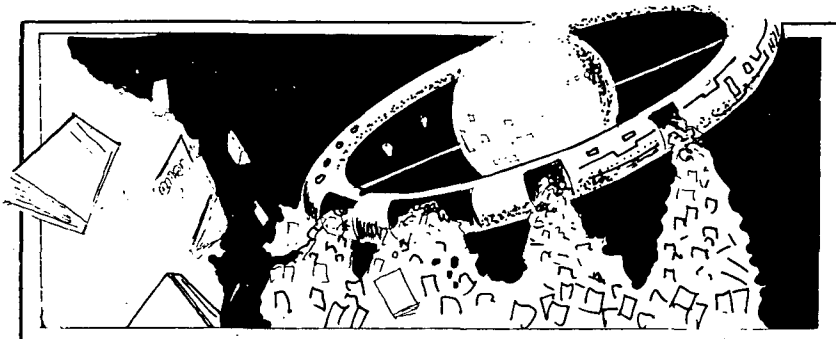

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

NORTH AMERICAN MAGIC REALISM

Vineland, Thomas Pynchon, Viking Penguin, 1991, $9.95(tp).
Dream Baby, Bruce McAllister, Tor Books, 1989, $18.95(hc). July 1991, $14.95(pb).
Only Begotten Daughter, James Morrow, William Morrow and Sons, 1990, $19.95(hc).
Good News from Outer Space, John Kessel, Tor Books, 1989, $18.95(hc).
Cortez on Jupiter, Ernest Hogan, Tor Books, 1990, $3.95(pb).

Lou Aronica, publisher of Bantam-Spectra-Foundation, is, among other things, a devotee of Latin American Magic Realism, though he hasn't published any of it in his SF lines. He is also my regular publisher, and we were discussing a possible novel project which I saw as something of a formal and stylistic departure from most of my previous novel-length work.

I was considering doing a novel called *Dope*, which would be an exploration of the past twenty-five years or so of American history centered precisely on the unexamined void at its heart, namely the role played by drugs in the evolution of American politics and culture from the close of the Eisenhower era to the present. It seemed to me that the very nature of the subject required that such a novel not be bound by the constraints of mimesis; that is, since it would be dealing with altered states of consciousness, it would have to admit a kind of surrealism, would have to be a kind of North American magic realism, in which the events of the story would follow an imagistic line of inner reality rather than a "realistic" depiction of external phenomenology.

"It could work," Lou said, "as long as the emotional story is realistic, whether the events that generate the emotions are realistic or not."

Well, that really got me thinking, not so much about my own novel project as about magic realism itself, for it suddenly seemed to me that Lou had snuck up on the best and broadest functional definition of magic realism that I had ever happened upon. A definition that included not only Latin American magic realism, not only much of the best modern science fiction and fantasy, but a powerful stream of general North American letters as well.

I had recently read *Vineland* —Thomas Pynchon's first novel since *Gravity's Rainbow*—a book that could not be considered SF by

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any conventional taxonomic definition. Yet *Gravity's Rainbow* had been nominated for a Nebula sixteen years ago, and it would be contorting literary reality even further to contend that these last two Pynchon novels, as well as *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, are not esthetically much the same sort of thing.

What sort of thing?

Well, much the same sort of thing as four other recent North American novels which *were* published as SF and more or less received as such—Bruce McAllister's *Dream Baby*, James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter*, John Kessel's *Good News From Outer Space*, and Ernest Hogan's *Cortez on Jupiter*.

Dream Baby is the story of a kind of psychic *LURP* mission during the Viet Nam war. *Only Begotten Daughter* is the tale of Julie Katz, the modern-day American sister of Jesus Christ. In *Good News from Outer Space*, a writer for something much like the *National Inquirer* pursues a shadowy shape-changing alien through the crazed landscape of turn-of-the-millennium America. Pablo Cortez, the hero of *Cortez on Jupiter*, is a space-going Chicano action painter and artistic guerrilla who achieves his apotheosis in communion with the Sirens of Jupiter.

Pynchon's sprawling first novel, *V*, is a *Ulysses*-like stagger through a 1950s bohemian dreamscape; his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, is a kind of condensed version of the Wilson-Shea *Illuminatus* conspiracy paranoiascape; *Gravity's Rainbow* is something like a combination of *The Tin Drum* and *Catch-22* on acid, and *Vineland* is a tight and uncharacteristically politically-committed retrospective evocation of the inner genesis of the cultural genocide we now know as the War on Drugs and what has been lost thereby.

North American magic realism.

We sort of know what we mean by magic realism of the generally recognized Latin American variety.

The magic of it is its surrealist surface texture, whether it is the formal Escher-like surrealism of Borges or Cortázar, in which the events themselves take place in a forthrightly artificial literary reality, or the imagistic transmogrification of historical events in something like Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*, or the imagined alternate history of his *The Old Gringo*, or the free-form historical recreations of Gabriel García Márquez. Most of this stuff is not mimetic, not meant to be taken as literal-minded descriptions of external reality.

The realism of it is somewhat elusive, but it is there all the same. For one thing, while Latin American magic realism may treat reality like silly putty, for the most part it is not played for laughs. It is not slapstick comedy, it is not meant as satire of reality, most of it isn't even funny. Indeed, a lot of it is in deadly earnest.

The emotions generated in the characters by the surreal skeins of

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events are real, passionate, deeply felt, and the reader is meant to take them on this level. This stuff is *serious*; many of the writers conceive of themselves as having a mission.

And that mission is not merely to explicate Latin American culture to itself, but in some elusive way to *create* it.

The greater part of Latin American magic realism is retrospective. It seeks to illuminate the nature of the Latin American psyche, indeed to evolve it, through the understanding of its past, not so much the past enshrined in the history books as the deeper inner reality thereof, the evolution of the collective Latin American unconscious, the Latin American soul, if you will.

And that is a soul with a deep division at its core, a division that is at once its strength and its curse.

What we think of as "Latin America" was born of the collision of two quite disparate and equally complex civilizations, the Catholic Hispanic conquistadors and the high native civilizations of Aztec Mexico and the Incan Andes.

The history books tell us that the European conquerors overwhelmed the native Indian civilizations militarily, politically, economically, technologically, and religiously in Latin America, just as they did in what is now the United States and Canada.

But the inner story was different.

In North America, the British invaders and their descendants encountered a low population density of hunter-gatherer cultures, stole their lands, pushed the Indians ever westward and finally into isolated reservations, creating an America based on the myth of virgin land and an empty frontier.

But in Mexico and the Andes, the Spaniards encountered larger populations and old well-established cultures replete with cities and complex agricultural technologies. Instead of driving the Indians out, they converted them and enslaved them, recreating a kind of European theocratic feudalism, with themselves as the nobility, the Indians as the serfs, and Catholicism as the moral justification.

With a few exceptions (Argentina, for example) most Latin American nations are mestizo cultures, with Spanish the language of the educated, the cities, the ruling and middle classes, but native Indian languages persisting to one degree or another in the hinterlands. The further from the major population centers you go, the more Catholicism blends with the old Indian mythic structures and symbol systems. Ethnographically speaking, the European influx never overwhelmed the native gene pools, so that most Latin America nations are as least as much successor-states to the old Indian cultures as they are European transplants.

What this has ended up creating is not only a complex and confusing melange of Indian and European culture, religion, art, symbology,

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image systems, and so forth at the heart of the collective Latin American consciousness, but a moral and spiritual identity crisis as well, particularly among the intellectual elites.

For generations, the descendants of the white Spanish conquerors were the political, economic, and intellectual elites, the descendants of the Indians were the peons, and the products of the unions between them, the mestizos, formed whatever middle class there was. To identify with the European aspect of their heritage was to seek upward mobility, to identify with the Indian aspect was to remain with the peasantry.

Many revolutions and upheavals later, most Latin American intellectual elites and middle classes are pretty thoroughly mestizoized, and so is Latin American culture. And the great unresolved question at the center of the Latin American soul is whether to identify with the European aspect (with the culture of the Spanish conquerors) or with the native aspect (the primeval indigenous culture upon which the European aspect is a forcefully imposed overlay). Whether, in moral terms, to consider oneself an inheritor of the imposed elite, or a spiritual descendant of the culturally oppressed victims thereof.

Put in these terms, it is easy enough to see that the true answer is neither and both, for the Latin American collective unconscious is by now a thorough if uneasy blend of the two, which is to say a new spirit still in the process of being born.

Thus the mission of the Latin American magic realists, which is to descend (or ascend) into this brujo's brew of conflicting cultural elements, and heal the split by bringing forth a new Latin American culture that is neither Indian nor Spanish, which is to say *create* that new collective cultural unconscious out of the disparate elements.

To do this, the Latin American magic realists reinterpret the actual events of Latin American history in terms of the collective cultural unconscious, in terms of myth, religion, competing image systems, cultural icons, and so forth, seeking not so much to rewrite political history as to illuminate it through mythic transmogrification.

The skein of events may become quite surreal, but the emotions evoked via their rendering are powerful, deep, and real indeed; stronger, deeper, and somehow more real than anything that might be called forth by mere mimetic recreation.

North American magic realism, in a sense, does much the same thing, but since it arises out of a quite different cultural and psychic matrix, the result is quite different.

The central North American cultural myth is that of filling a supposedly empty frontier with a new society, a society forever in the process of self-creation, a zeitgeist

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with its eye fixed on the future rather than the past, a culture which at its best seeks to understand its present not so much as the product of its history but as the current stage in its ongoing evolution.

Which is why American science fiction is so firmly rooted in the future, and also why North American fiction which seeks to delve the depths of the American collective unconscious in the manner of the Latin American magic realists so often ends up being either science fiction of the sort to be found in *Good News from Outer Space, Only Begotten Daughter*, and *Dream Baby*, or something like *Vineland*, which, though not SF by any coherent taxonomic definition, still somehow partakes of the same spirit.

Cortez on Jupiter illuminates the relationship between Latin American magic realism and the North American variety in a rather unique manner. Though the hero, Pablo Cortez, is a Chicano, the author, Ernest Hogan, at least to judge by his name, is not. And while "Cortez" is certainly a common enough Hispanic surname, it doesn't seem to have been chosen at random. It gives Hogan a title which evokes the central event in the formation of Mexican—hence Chicano— culture even while it is loudly and obviously proclaiming the novel to be a work of science fiction.

Then too, while much of the action does take place on space stations orbiting the Earth and Jupiter, the rest of it takes place in a future Los Angeles, a city which itself is both archetypally North American and more and more deeply Chicano.

Pablo Cortez himself is a thoroughgoing future Angeleno, a fast-talking, forthrightly self-promoting media-freak, the artist as show biz personality, about as LA as you can get. Even his Chicano cultural allegiance is pure Los Angeles, the result of being brought up by parents who were devotees of a somewhat whacked-out neo-Aztec cult.

Pablo narrates the story in first person (with interspersed third-person screenplay media cuts) in a rapid-fire wisecrackling prose filled with Spanglish puns, word-games, and locutions. One is at first mightily impressed by the way Hogan does this. But after a while stuff like "nadawhere," "un bad muchacho," "locoized in the cabeza," and "microchancito" begins to seem forced, unnatural, like an Anglo working with a dictionary and not quite making it.

Yet as you get further into it, maybe not. True, Pablo doesn't really sound like an authentic present day Chicano, but that may not be what Hogan intended. His rap is also well-larded with SF jargon like "waldostalks," "apt," "televoodoozing," cyber this and cyber that, as well as show biz jargon. McLuhanistic buzzwords, etc.

Pablo sounds like an authentic *Pablo*, a future Angeleno whose consciousness is informed by show biz, New Age babble, science fic-

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tion, and a mediaized, McLuhanated, Hollywooded, transmogrified future version of Chicano English.

In the end, this prose line becomes a perfect instrument for conveying Pablo's reality, for despite his La Raza proclamations, his use of Spanish, his obsession with Aztec mythology and image systems, indeed in part because of them, Pablo Cortez is as (North) American as, well, Los Angeles, or the science fiction novel in which he exists.

Cortez on Jupiter is a novel about art, for despite Pablo's self-aggrandizing rapping, he *is* an artistic genius, and Hogan admirably uses the style he has created to vividly portray his artist in the act of actual creation. Pablo is not only a true artist, he is a self-conscious artist with plenty of insight into his own creative processes, well able and more than willing to elucidate the ways in which his art emerges from both the collective unconscious of his cultural matrix and his own individual psychic history.

And it is this which enables him to survive contact with the "Sirens" of the Jovian atmosphere and return therefrom with coherent artistic communication when all the true-blue astronauts are turned into brain-dead zombies.

Thus, in a weird way, *Cortez on Jupiter* works the interface between Latin American and North American magic realism; indeed the title, with its dual reference to Mexican history and science fiction, rather openly proclaims it. As an artist, Pablo Cortez is self-consciously and deeply into Aztec imagery, and the magical transformation of interior myth into cultural artifact which is the core of the novel and Pablo's obsession is precisely the esthetic heart of Latin American magic realism.

But by making Pablo a thoroughgoing Angeleno—a product not of the collision of Indian and Hispanic cultures but of the melding of Chicano culture and Anglo pop—and grounding his novel in the literary conventions of science fiction rather than magic realism, Ernest Hogan has created a kind of North American magic realism *about* Latin American magic realism.

North American magic realism tends to turn the Latin American version inside out. That is, even a novel like James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter*, whose central character is God's daughter and Jesus' sister, who converses with sentient sponges, who spends part of the novel in hell, who possesses all sorts of mystical powers, still maintains a kind of zany illusion of verisimilitude.

Unlike most Latin American magic realism and like the Hogan novel, only more so, *Only Begotten Daughter* is funny, as North American magic realism so often is, as we shall see again in *Good News from Outer Space*, and even Pynchon. And even though it can hardly be called mimetic or realistic, it *is*

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somehow science fiction.

Morrow is forthrightly retelling the Christ myth here, with serious moral intent, and not really sacreligiously either. Like Jesus, Julie Katz is Jewish, the product of a kind of virgin birth, wrestles with the devil and with the equivalent of corrupt high priests, and redeems humanity with an act of self-sacrifice imposed upon her by her parent, God.

But Julie is a contemporary American Jew who is the product of a sperm bank and an artificial womb. She grows up in Atlantic City, New Jersey, meets a Satan addicted to Pall Malls, and has a crazed televangelist as an earthly nemesis. God turns out to be not only female, but a sentient female *sponge*. And Julie's act of self-sacrificing spiritual apotheosis is not a physical crucifixion unto death, but the forswearing of her mystic powers.

Morrow turns Latin American magic realism literally inside out by taking a totally surreal skein of events and narrating them via the tropes and tricks that science fiction in general has developed to create the literary illusion of verisimilitude.

He grounds his story in the gritty and realistically rendered quotidian reality of Atlantic City. Having established this tone, he is then able to make Julie's voyage to hell (in Satan's yacht) and even her sojourn in that nether region seem somehow like more of the tacky same. Daughter of God or not, Julie comes off as basically a nice Jewish girl from Jersey, and so we accept Brother Jesus as more of the same when we meet him. Her mystic birth is given a more or less credible scientific rationale.

In other words, Morrow uses the literary techniques of science fiction to get us to accept this fantasy material as taking place in an alternate mimetic reality, rather than as something existing strictly in an artificial "literary space," which is as good a functional definition of what makes science fiction science fiction as any.

And when applied to this kind of material with Morrow's level of skill, it cannot help but be funny, for the "realistic" narration of surreal events is the formal wellspring of a branch of modern and characteristically American humor.

Morrow, like the typical North American magic realist, also turns Latin American magic realism inside out by basing much of his imagery and references not in the historical past or the formal collective cultural unconscious, but in American pop culture, epitomized by his use of the sleazoid gambling den of Atlantic City as his main venue.

One enormous difference between modern North American culture and contemporary Latin American culture is that by this stage in our history, pop culture *is* the American collective unconscious. It is the myths we live by, blasted into our brains by TV, movies, radio, comic books, Hollywood,

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Madison Avenue, MTV, and so forth—as perfectly epitomized by Ronald Reagan, our movie actor President who was impressed upon our culture as a B-movie John Wayne figure, entered politics via his success as a corporate TV spokesman on "General Electric Theater," and had a great deal of difficulty himself distinguishing the actual events of World War II from the scripts of the war movies he made in Hollywood.

Where the Latin American magic realists strive to create a unified collective unconscious out of the twin streams of their past history, North American magic realists are supplied with an already existing collective American unconscious in the form of a pop culture that has been made universal by the ubiquitous media machineries of show biz.

How this happened could be the subject of whole book-length treatises and novels, but for present purposes, the point is that North Americans are already living in a kind of magic reality, in which the collective unconsciousness has been thoroughly Hollywoodized and Madisonavenueized, in which archetypal images come and go with the speed of the Nielsens and the Top 40 charts, in which religion has become TV spectacle, in which even "high art" tends to ground its imagistic references in TV, film, and records, in which TV refers to other TV, in which newscasters live and die by the same ratings as talk-show hosts, in which a multibillion dollar War on Drugs, which has bloated the prison population, destabilized at least four Latin American countries, and created urinanalysis as a rich growth industry, could have arisen as the ploy chosen by media managers to improve Nancy Reagan's sagging image.

If this is our collective reality, it shouldn't be so surprising that a writer as skilled as James Morrow should be able to use the literary techniques of science fiction to get us to accept the nice Jewish daughter of a sentient transcendent sponge as a deity on more or less the same reality level.

Which is to say that North American magic realism has little trouble being *psychically* mimetic, even harrowing, and funny at the same time. These *are* the jokes, folks, and we are all in them.

An even more perfect case in point, perhaps, is John Kessel's *Good News from Outer Space.* This novel is often screamingly funny. How could it not be? Its protagonist, George Eberhart, is a star reporter for something called the Hemisphere Confidential Report, an on-line version of the *National Inquirer* and its numerous clones.

PITTSBURGH MILLWORKER EATS HIMSELF! PUPPY FROM HELL TERRORIZES FAMILY! SCIENTISTS PROVE ELVIS REINCARNATED AS PORPOISE!

These happen to be headlines from Kessel's novel, but you can hardly wait on a supermarket

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check-out line without being assaulted by exactly the same thing, as typified by a story on illegal rooster-fights in Los Angeles that I actually saw, with the banner headline MUTILATED COCKS THRILL SADISTS!

What Kessel gives us is merely (merely?) the present-day sleazoid mediasphere cranked up a notch or two by impending millenarian madness. As such, it is both hilarious satire and all too extrapolatively realistic.

Yet despite all the humor, *Good News from Outer Space* is a serious novel.

As the year 2000 approaches, Rev. Jimmy-Don Gilray, star of the Zion Tribulation Hour, proclaims that God will send his minions in a giant spaceship to bring the Day of Judgment at the stroke of midnight in Raleigh, North Carolina. He gets elected mayor, proclaims the city Zion, and erects a giant landing pad.

In a country which has already experienced the antics of Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and the Reverend Ike without benefit of millenarianism, is this really surreal satire?

George, meanwhile, has died and been brought back to life by scientific means, which makes him one of the soulless zombies in the eyes of the ascendant holy-rollers, who are also heavily into self-flagellation and some pretty kinky sex. His cynical media-maven buddy has become Gilray's eminence gris. His wife has taken up with feminist terrorists.

And George is on the trail of a mysterious Alien, a shapechanger who can look like any human, and who appears at strategic moments in the lives of various characters, sometimes committing horrid atrocities, physical or psychic, sometimes supplying positive satoris, always acting as a catalyst for change.

The genius of the novel is that Kessel successfully walks a fine line between mordant farce and psychological realism. As the climactic countdown proceeds towards zero, events become crazier and crazier, but the madness is not all played for laughs. A lot of it is genuinely horrific, and rendered as such. And the characters are all realistically portrayed as people we can either care for or hate or both.

Kessel gives us real people moving through an American reality that gets more and more surreal, in which horror and humor mingle more and more intimately as Judgment Day approaches. "Humor," as the old *Mad* comic used to have it, "in a jugular vein."

For the surreal America depicted here is, in a very real sense, the landscape of our present collective unconscious, the externalization of the interior mediascape, hyped up just a bit by millenarian methedrine, and even while we are laughing at the jokes and grimacing at the grue, we cannot entirely escape the feeling that It Could Happen Here. In a psychic and cul-

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tural sense it already has, given Charles Manson, crystal channeling, Nancy Reagan's court astrologer, Jimmy Carter's encounter with a UFO, the Animal Liberation Front, the *National Inquirer*, the Diceman, Morton Downey Junior, and a real New York cable TV show called "Chicks with Dicks."

And this isn't even 1999 yet!

Which is not to say that there cannot be a variant of North American magic realism which mixes mimesis and a kind of science fictional surreality in a way that is not funny at all. Given the right subject and the right setting, even totally mimetic science fiction set in the real historical past can become, in a sense, realer than real.

After all, for eleven years, the United States fought what can only be called a magic realist war in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam was the first war to be brought into every living room as an ongoing television show, a war which began with the Tonkin Gulf Incident, a phony media event, and ended with live coverage of the fall of Saigon. A war in which dying men on stretchers mugged into TV cameras for the folks back home. A war which was essentially lost during the Tet Offensive, which the Viet Cong lost on the battlefield but won on television and in the American consciousness.

Real-life magic realism with a vengeance, but not funny at all.

And also, inevitably, a science fiction war.

When the war started, combat hovercraft, laser-guided smart bombs, defoliant warfare, the electronic battlefield, night-vision glasses, drug-addiction as a weapon, were all the stuff of science fiction, but before it was over they were all real.

And during the war, there were rumors of all sorts of other things too, the most bizarre of which was described to me by a combat-crazed vet as a small antipersonnel missile which could seek you out anywhere, fly around corners even, until it fragged your ass.

Sure . . .

TV guided cruise missiles, anyone?

So who knows, maybe something like the CIA experiment called Operation Orangutan in Bruce McAllister's *Dream Baby* really *was* tried, as McAllister seems to indicate in the opening acknowledgments. The CIA, after all, *did* experiment with LSD brainwashing, did try to kill Castro with exploding cigars and poisoned scuba gear, and did indeed to my more or less direct knowledge experiment with "distant vision" psychic espionage techniques stateside.

It doesn't really matter whether *Dream Baby* is science fiction, fantasy, or based on a real operation; McAllister's novel has the ring of inner truth, conveys the psychic reality of Viet Nam, the horrid magical realism of it all, in a way that few fictional works, SF or otherwise, manage to do.

Mary Damico is an Army nurse in Viet Nam, who, under the ter-

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rible pressure of combat medicine, begins having visions. Visions of people dying, which turn out to be specifically predictive. Turns out that other people in Nam have psychic visions useful in combat situations, too, soldiers whose time-sense slows down in battle, soldiers who can see the trajectories of incoming fire in advance, and unerringly step around it. Even a psychic dog.

Operation Orangutan is a CIA attempt to make use of these psychic powers, and Mary is recruited into it. She becomes part of a LURP unit, along with other psychics, dropped deep into North Viet Nam to blow the Red River dikes, flood the North Vietnamese heartland, and win the war.

The bulk of the novel is the story of the mission, and it is perhaps not giving too much away to say that the novel ends with a most satisfying alternate reality twist. Along the way, McAllister drops in interviews with people who have had psychic experiences in Nam, some of which are cited and credited as real in the acknowledgments, leaving the question of how much of this might have really happened nicely ambiguous throughout.

I was never in Viet Nam, and I don't know whether Bruce McAllister was either, but *Dream Baby* at least impresses me as one of the two best fictional renderings of what it must have really been like there during the war that I have read—at least in magic realist terms.

McAllister tells the whole story in utterly realistic terms, in powerful prose, with psychic and characterological verisimilitude, and with telling descriptive detail, making you feel that you are really there for the duration. The visions and psychic events only add to the sense of inner verisimilitude, somehow, convincing you, in the manner of science fiction, that if these things didn't really happen under the conditions he describes, they could have, indeed should have.

Interestingly enough, the best totally mimetic novel about the Vietnam war that I know of is *A Reckoning for Kings*, by Chris Bunch and Alan Cole, one of whom was not only there, but who had plenty of experience on similar missions. *A Reckoning for Kings* may be a totally realistic novel, and *Dream Baby* may be science fiction or magic realism, but if you read both novels, you are indeed left with the impression that they are both describing the same psychic space.

Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely, Bunch and Cole just happen to be the authors of the *Sten* novels, science fiction mordantly working somewhat similar military territory in a galactic future.

Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* comes from a different direction than the novels previously considered, but arrives in much the same place. In a certain sense, Pynchon has been North America's pre-

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miere magic realist ever since *V*, but in another sense, he never wrote North American magic realism before *Vineland* at all.

V and *Gravity's Rainbow* are established American literary classics—marvelously written, funny, deadly serious, enormously erudite, filled with vast lore of subjects as diverse as World War II, psychopharmacology, old movies, American and German pop culture, history, philosophy, and much, much more. Both novels are huge, rambling, highly discursive, and impossible to summarize.

If they have a weakness, aside from Pynchon's characteristic problem with structure, particularly endings, it is the psychic distance that Pynchon maintains between himself and his characters, hence between his characters and the reader. Like Vonnegut, only much more so, Pynchon seems to be narrating these novels from a cool distance; the characters are bizarre, interesting, in a certain sense believable, but you never really get inside them, they never really touch your heart, they never truly become real.

In this sense, *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are not North American magic realism in the terms under discussion; the surface surreality is all there and marvelously so, but it is not grounded in characterological depth or inner psychic reality. In Lou Aronica's terms, neither the events which generate the emotions, nor the emotions themselves are "realistic." They are all surreal phenomenological surface and *no* inner reality.

This does not make them bad books, indeed they are great books, made so by Pynchon's humor, erudition, inventiveness, bizarre imagination, wealth of detail—all surreal surface, maybe, but *what* surface!

The Crying of Lot 49, written between *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, displays mostly the inherent pitfall of this approach. Short, complexly and paranoiacally plotted but badly resolved, all surface and no depth, it reads a bit like the speed-fueled minor novels like *The Zap Gun* and *Counterclock World* that Philip K. Dick churned out for money in between masterpieces like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik*, but without Dick's always-present saving grace—caritas, empathy, love for his characters.

But now, after a seventeen-year silence, we have *Vineland*, not successful science fiction like *Gravity's Rainbow*, not failed science fiction like *The Crying of Lot 49*, not a semi-Beat semi-farce like *V*, but North American magic realism indeed in terms of the present discussion, and in a very real sense, enlivened with a true Dickian spirit that Pynchon has never shown us before.

The Vineland of the title is a Northern Californian county more or less modeled on Mendocino, and the time, appropriately enough, is 1984. Vineland (like the real Mendocino) has become a haven for ref-

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ugees from the collapse of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, among them Zoyd Wheeler, aging hippie living off his government disability checks and odd jobs in and around the local pot-growing industry which is the economic underpinning of the county.

But this is the age of the War on Drugs, of CAMP raids on the Northern Californian pot fields, and Brock Vond, Zoyd's old DEA nemesis from his small-time dope-dealing days, is out to shut it all down. Zoyd's ex-wife, Frensi, a political activist in the days of the counterculture, was turned into a fink by Vond, became his lover, split, and is now being tracked by Vond, who also hopes to use Prairie, her daughter by Zoyd, to get at her.

As one would expect from Pynchon, there is, of course, much, much more—Hector Zuniga, Zoyd's friendly DEA enemy from the old days, mysterious abductions from airliners, a sinister dentist, long flashbacks to the halcyon days of the counterculture and the People's Republic of Rock and Roll, punks, mafiosi, Zen feminist martial artists, a Japanese private eye, Frensi's old time radical grandparents and the Thanatoids, ghostly undead who haunt the proceedings.

That is the surface surreality —bizarre, rich, funny, erudite, full of pop imagery, Pynchon at the top of his usual form. But this time out, there is an inner reality to the narrative, the theme, and the characters; here, for the first time, we have a passionate Pynchon, a politicized Pynchon, even an angry Pynchon, a Pynchon who cares for his characters, for a time, a place, a spirit, in the process of being snuffed out.

For the Vineland of the title is not just the name of a fictional Northern Californian county. As Pynchon explicitly states in the text, it is "Vineland the Good." Vineland the Good, the name given to the virgin continent by the first Vikings to set foot on its wooded shores. Vineland the Good, the Ur-America of the spirit, Vineland the Good, the last refuge of that spirit, besieged by CAMP, by the DEA, by the crazed Brock Vond, by Nixonoids, by Reaganoids, by the America of 1984 in every sense of the term.

This time out, Pynchon uses his encyclopedic historical knowledge, his mastery of pop trivial pursuit, his flashback techniques, his intimate relationship with the American zeitgeist, to give us a passionately felt, indeed loving, homage to that other America, to the now-vanished counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and to the refugees therefrom. Not viewed through rose-colored granny glasses or a lysergic haze, but a balanced view, with all the craziness, sleazy dope-dealing, betrayals, and failures, but still a vision of a kind of Aquarian Golden Age, refusing, like his forlorn Thanatoids, to fade entirely from the Northern California landscape of Vineland the

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Good.

Characteristically, Pynchon seems to have trouble with his ending. The novel ends in 1984, we all know what really happened then and afterward, so given Pynchon's theme and viewpoint, given the history of the years between then and now, historical accuracy and realistic mimesis could only have ended the novel as a tragedy, with Zoyd, Frensi, Prairie, and the other good people thereof scattered, dead, or in jail, with Vineland the Good conquered by the forces of bureaucratic Reaganism and its very memory all-but-expunged from the collective American unconscious as happened in the real world.

But Pynchon doesn't do that. Instead, he evokes a certain amount of mysticalist mumbo-jumbo to give Brock Vond and all he represents his horrific just deserts, and let Vineland survive somehow as a Brigadoon in the redwoods.

A cop-out? A distortion of history? A tacked-on false happy ending? A lie?

Maybe.

But a Vonnegutian lie, a foma: a lie, perhaps, with the power to make those willing to believe it strong and brave and happy. Not a true telling of historical reality, not even a North American magic realist portrayal of the inner truth of the collective American cultural unconscious, but something that in the end makes Pynchon a spiritual brother to the Latin American magic realists, who seek not so much to portray inner cultural reality as to change it, to create it, to seize this sorry scheme of things entire and mold it closer to the heart's desire.

Could Shakespeare have had a precog flash of Pynchon's novel when he wrote—

"[He] . . . can call spirits from the vasty deep."

In *Vineland*, Thomas Pynchon has summoned such a spirit from the vasty deep of the collective American unconscious, a literary attempt to conjure Vineland the Good from the mists of imposed cultural amnesia, an act of magic realism in the ultimate sense.

Will it come forth when he calls it? ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Things are still slow in the wake of the holidays, so be thinking about spring. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, tell why you're calling right off. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (say what it's for). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

JANUARY 1991

25-27—**ConFusion.** For info, write: **AASFA, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** Or call **(313) 761-1514** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Southfield MI (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Days Hotel. Guests include: E. Friesner, Robin Wood, S.P. Somtow (Sucharitkul).

25-28—**SwanCon, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia. 382-1833, 447-7545.** Freeway Hotel, Perth.

FEBRUARY 1991

1-3—**Arisia, Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge** (near Boston) **MA 02139.** Jack Chalker, Bob Walker.

1-3—**Treble, 18 Glynde Rd., Brighton, E. Sussex, BN2 2YJ, UK.** National annual SF folksinging con.

1-3—**CzarKon, 1156 Remley Ct., University City MO 63130. (314) 725-6448.** Adults-only relaxacon.

8-10—**PsurrealCon, OK Mem. Union, Room 215A, Norman OK 73019.** Lackey, D. Anderson, Rogers.

15-17—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Mike Resnick.

15-17—**CostumeCon, %Condon, Box 194, Mt. Airy MD 21771.** Baltimore MD. Costumers' annual do.

16—**Ufouni ve Slanem, %Ladislav Peska, Na dolikach 503, Slany 274 01, Czechoslovakia.** SF day.

22-24—**Reconnaisance, 5 St. Andrew's Rd., Carshalton, Surrey SM5 2DY, UK.** New Work/Ideas in SF.

28-Mar. 3—**World Horror Con, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202. (615) 226-6172.** C. Yarbro, Bauman.

MARCH 1991

1-3—**ConSonance, %Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604.** Gytha North, Rilla Heslin. An SF folksinging con.

7-10—**ConTact, %CASFS, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061.** Symposium on Anthropology & SF.

8-10—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** D. Brin, F. Kelly-Freas, the Ballantines, Hal Clement.

21-24—**AggieCon, Box J-1, MSC, College Station TX 77844. (409) 845-1515.** Over 3000 are expected.

22-24—**MillenniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405.** C.J. Cherryh, Joe Patrouch, Dr. Bill Breuer.

28-31—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Usually 100+ pros (writers, etc.)

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $110 to 3/31/91.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407)859-8421.** The '92 World SF Con. $75 to 3/31/91.

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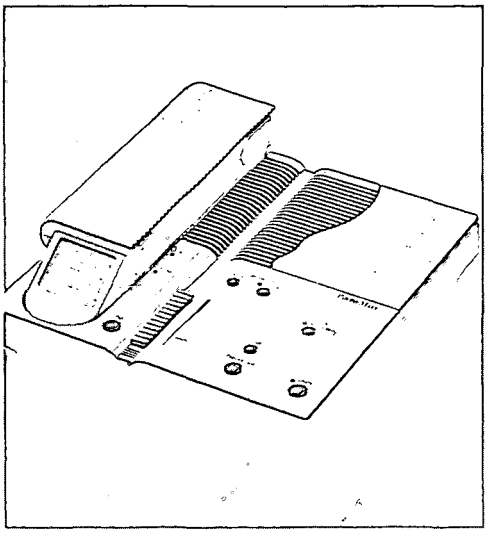

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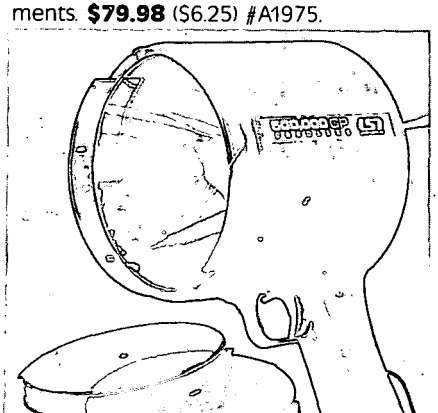

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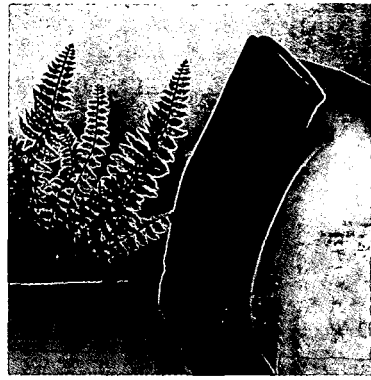

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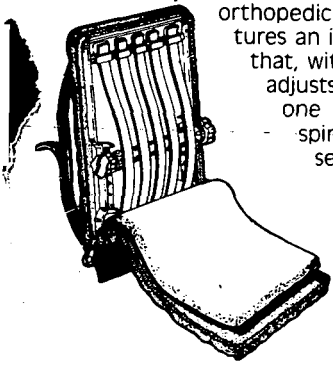

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